



# Modern Short Stories OF Indian Life

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## Introduction .

Within the pages of this small book is contained the first publication attempted, to bring into the English language the essence of India's modern short story writing. It is true that many translations of India's ancient and classical literature are available and these provide us with an excellent background for understanding the philosophy of today's Indians ; also, Tagore and Mrs. Naidu have enriched our language with their own distinctive lyricisms ; but there has not been any work that offers those of us unfamiliar with the vernaculars, an idea of what the Indian of today sees and feels in relation to our modern world.

Perhaps you will be surprised as I was, that the style in which these stories are written is not very different from what we consider most generally acceptable in our best English short stories. After all, the clear, almost brutally simple and direct realism we now appreciate is far different from the grandiloquent sentimentality of just a few decades ago, and there was no particular reason to suppose that the Indians would have adopted a style similar to ours in their own writing. Yet they have, and the most style-conscious reader will have no complaints on this point here.

It seems important to mention that writing as a career in India is anything but a lucrative profession. This means, then, that the authors of these stories did their work because they had something to say and, whether it will be tragedy or comedy, serious or light, it will be vital and sincere.

However, the mechanics of composition must be in second place to the story itself, and it is surprising again that many of the problems which have driven these writers to pen and paper have parallels in our own ways of living. This makes for a universal appeal and we find no difficulty in appreciating them. Then again, the editor has made his selections with an eye to showing as many phases as he could of modern Indian life, and the translator has made every effort to retain the true flavour of the native idiom. The result is a collection of very readable stories spiced with the exotic richness of Indian customs and traditions.

It is to be hoped that the compilers will be encouraged to do many more of these translations, for they will indeed make a new and interesting addition to the literature of our language.

Humphrey Evans

## Preface

About a month ago we were asked by Messrs. The Educational Publishing Co. if we would write for them a book describing aspects of Indian life for which there seemed to be demand from the American and English troops stationed in India. It happened that about this time we were reading together a number of stories in Sindhi, and so we suggested the translation into English of some modern Indian short stories as portraying Indian life in a more agreeable form, and the suggestion was readily accepted. The stories selected, we think, give a fairly true picture of some features of Indian life.

This Preface is however intended more for the Indian reader than the Western. Some explanation in regard to these stories has seemed necessary to us. Of the three Sindhi stories appearing in the book, *Brother Abdul Rahman* and *The Brahmin's Wife* are translations, *Bhagat* being the only story in this selection written directly in English by its author. The remaining stories are all translations, one *The Horoscope of Satyen* by N. N. Chatterji having been translated by the author himself from the original Bengali; the rest have been translated by one of the Compilers from the Sindhi versions of stories originally written in different Indian languages, that have appeared in some Sindhi periodicals. This mode of translating from translations is not, we admit, a satisfactory way of doing the job.

But we saw before us some really good short stories which we felt should be translated into English, if only for the encouragement of our own writers. More often than not we found that the proper names used in the Sindhi versions were Sindhi, no source either of language or author being mentioned. Enquiries made by us did not help us much. Possibly, therefore, the Sindhi versions are no more than adaptations or free renderings. But such as they were, we thought them good and worth translating.

With one reservation, however. In all except two or three stories it was found necessary to make some changes. Our popular writers, it would seem, are still groping their way to the mastery of this form. Often at crucial moments the psychological reactions of their characters are not described, and without these the educated reader is left unsatisfied. In other places again the writers will introduce unnecessary details, running into paragraphs and even pages, which have no bearing on character and do not help to develop the situation. In the stories before us, quite often we found contradictions and inconsistencies, showing that some details had not been well thought out. Such defects it seemed necessary to remove not only in the interest of the foreign reader but the Indian also. Some of the Indian readers of these translations may have read the original stories. They will be able to see in which detail the translator has

considered them defective—provided of course the Sindhi versions tally with them. Though the translations from the Sindhi are the work of one Compiler only, the other Compiler who was reading scores of stories to select from has been constantly consulted and the two have found themselves in perfect agreement over the changes.

These changes have been of many kinds. Apart from the elaborations, abridgements and compressions, the translator has often substituted dialogue for straight narration because it is so necessary to maintain the reader's interest. In *The Gate-Keeper*, the situation seemed lop-sided with sentiment, showing only the poor man's side of the problem. It was thought necessary to present the official view-point also and so restore the balance. In *The Poet* it seemed a pity not to develop the fine character of the poet's wife since scope for it was there. Other changes made are perhaps too minor to be separately indicated. The Compilers are aware that the original writers of these stories and some of the readers familiar with them in the original, may not regard some or even all of the changes as improvements. On the other hand, having read and closely studied innumerable foreign short stories, including some of the finest ever written, we feel confident that many readers will endorse the changes. What accuracy the Sindhi translators have shown we cannot say. We had only the Sindhi



versions to go by and the translator has tried, as far as possible and necessary, to be true to them. It has by no means been an easy task, chiefly because of the shortness of time during which the work was to be completed. But it has been tremendous fun to both of us, the work being in a real sense a joint effort. As each story came out of the press the translator realised only too well his own limitations, though it is quite possible that given more time he might have been able to improve the language somewhat.

Two of the stories in the collection are little master-pieces of their kind in the original and there has been very little tampering done with them: *Brother Abdul Rahman* and *What a Story!*, both of which are humorous. Being Sindhis we are naturally glad that one of them is originally a Sindhi story. Two other stories in this collection deserve special mention. *The Stone* has been included because of its philosophical background, to give to the Western reader an idea of the basis of Hindu philosophy. Because of this background the average reader might consider the story dull. But it is a fine story. Its development is necessarily slow and it is built up with a masterly technique. The *Horoscope of Satyen* is based on the question: "Is Astrology a science or a superstition?" But apart from that theme there is a deeper ground for conflict in the story. Ultimately it could be stated in the crude and hackneyed formula of

East vs. West. Satyen proved by his desperate gesture that what he prized so much in Eastern culture must be true. He paid a terrible price, but Ramen's dramatic confession of Satyen's triumph comes as a fine climax to the story.

Contemporary European and American literatures being highly sophisticated, the foreign readers of these stories will perhaps consider them rather sentimental. But sentimentalism, we think, is more or less our national trait, and we can therefore avoid it in our literature only with an effort, a self-imposed restraint. Even in this respect, however, the translator has tried his best to suppress it wherever possible. On the whole, as they are, the stories, we think, are worth appearing in print. The credit goes of course to their original writers. We dare say there are many short stories written in the various modern Indian languages which are better than the stories that figure in this volume, and it is a pity that they are not being translated into English so that they may be known in all parts of India.

We should like to thank our American friends, Humphrey and Doris Evans, with whom we have spent many exciting "literary evenings" and whose suggestions in this work have been invaluable.

T. H. Advani

October 1, 1942.

M. U. Malkani

## Acknowledgements

We tender our thanks to Miss Gopi Mukhi (now Mrs. Gauba) and Messrs. Amarlal Hingorani, Assanand Mamtora and N. N. Chatterji for permission to use their stories for this volume.

To the other authors whose names we do not know we make grateful acknowledgement. If they should happen to read these translations and recognise their work, we shall be very glad to hear from them and announce their names in the next edition.

We also thank the organizers of "Ratan Sahitya Mandal", "Kahani Sahitya Mandir" and "Kauromal Sindhi Sahitya Mandal" for using their Sindhi versions for some of these translations, and of the D. J. Sind College Miscellany for reprinting *Bhagat*.

The Publishers

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\*Translated by T. H. Advani

†Translated by the writer

# ERRATA

Page 17, line 14. for "there are" read "there were".

Page 52, line 23. for "has done" read "had done".

Page 72, footnote 11. for "keep times" read "keep time".

## Brother Abdul Rahman

Some thought him daft, others considered him a *dervish*, a wandering fakir, God-intoxicated. He may have been both. In appearance he was lean, rather tall, and wheat-complexioned. His body was not altogether bare, and he went about loosely wrapped in an old quilt. He seemed always in a state of spiritual animation. He visited all manner of places of worship, no matter what their religious denomination. Mosque and shrine alike were Houses of God, and he was seen frequenting both. On the wharf at Sukkur, facing the railway goods office, folk would often gather near the petty shops and recite *shlokas*, verses, from the Hindu religious poet Swami. Brother Abdul Rahman would also join the gathering and sit and listen with pleasure. Now and again he would mutter to himself, "Brother Abdul Rahman, are you following it? When will you begin to see light?"

One day he tripped over a stone. He said to himself, "Brother Abdul Rahman, how proud and arrogant you are! Walking with a cocked head. If you looked down you would

not stumble." He had not gone a few steps when he pulled up and started upbraiding himself: "Brother Abdul Rahman, how selfish you are! Was it right to have left that stone where it was? Suppose another wayfarer tripped over it?" After a pause he said solemnly, "Brother Abdūl Rahman, if you are a good fellow you will pick up that stone and throw it aside." And he went back and flung it out of the way.

He was in the habit of talking to himself, as a philosopher to a friend, as one person to another, in constant exhortation, his form of address invariably being "Brother Abdul Rahman". He would penetrate into his own being as into another's and speak to himself profoundly. If somebody said to him, "Abdūl Rahman, are you hungry? would you like to eat?" he would turn to himself and ask, "Brother Abdul Rahman, he wants to know if you are hungry and would like to eat." And he would answer, after considering a little, by quoting a Persian proverb: "One must eat to live, not live to eat." In this manner he would confer with himself before answering. He wrote Persian poetry, knew Hafiz by heart and a good portion of Shah Abdul Latif<sup>1</sup> and Swamī. Of Saint Sachal<sup>2</sup> he was a veritable disciple.

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1, 2, 3. Premier poets of Sind.

He knew Urdu also. When there were letters in Urdu from the Punjab, Abdul Rahman had to be sought out to read and interpret them. He was of a quiet and gentle disposition. He coveted nothing, had few wants, and even ate sparingly. His *godri*, the old quilt, was always wrapped round him, whatever the season. At night it served as covering. However oppressive the heat, he had his *gordi* about him and defied it, though other men almost died of it. Who knows what secret converse he held with his Beloved<sup>4</sup> under cover of his *godri* !

One day an innocent man found himself involved in a criminal prosecution. He was accused of having stolen a gold watch belonging to a Muslim *Seth*<sup>5</sup>. The police had searched him and found it on his person in front of witnesses. The evidence against him was strong and it seemed unlikely that the man would be acquitted. The *Seth* was a man of influence. The accused stated that it was a trumped-up charge. He had one day passed by the *Seth's* house. The *Seth* somehow got it into his head that the accused had made signs to his womenfolk. As a consequence the poor fellow was beaten mercilessly by the *Seth*, and but for Abdul Rahman, who happen-

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4. Some devout Indians think of God as the Divine Beloved and themselves as His lovers and seekers. 5. Merchant.



ed then to appear on the scene, the man might have been beaten to death. Even after Abdul Rahman's intercession the *Seth* would not be appeased. He said that the fellow had "cast an evil eye on his honour." It was intolerable that he should continue to live thereafter. The *Seth* was a man of honour. And honour was.....

Abdul Rahman began to hold a conference with himself. "Brother Abdul Rahman," he said, "the *Seth* will not desist. His honour is very dear to him. He has a sister, thirty-five years of age, and yet he will not find her a husband, because she will then demand a share of the patrimony. A woman must either have a husband or a....." The philosopher curbed himself. "No, Brother Abdul Rahman," he said, "do not lift the veil from other men's affairs. Better expostulate with the *Seth* again. If he refuses to see reason you may speak the whole truth." Now Abdul Rahman never discoursed to himself *sotto voce*. His words on this occasion had thrown enough light on the situation and everyone present, including the *Seth*, had heard him. Thus was the poor man saved. But there was a buzz of gossip about the baseness of the *Seth* and he lost his reputation. Hence the prosecution, a made-up affair.

The *Seth* denied everything. He had bought off three of the four defence witnesses, who either did not appear in court or pretended ignorance. There remained only Abdul Rahman the Incorruptible. Counsel for defence seriously doubted the sagacity of putting such a man in the witness-box. But the accused had implicit faith in Abdul Rahman. Being a God-fearing man he could be relied upon to tell the truth.

When Abdul Rahman received a summons he said, "Brother Abdul Rahman, you have been summoned to appear in a Court of Justice. Such a place is worthy of respect." That meant that he must not go there unshod. He managed to get hold of a pair of shoes for the occasion, not to look respectable, but to show deference to a place so "worthy of respect". At every hearing he went to the court in his *godri*, carrying his shoes<sup>6</sup>. When he was called for evidence he put them on with great ceremony. The *godri* was folded lengthwise and worn like a scarf round his neck. He had hardly stepped in when the liveried peon of the court asked him to leave his shoes outside, as others, who did not count in the social hierarchy, did. "Brother Abdul Rahman,"

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6. Poor villagers in Sind carry their shoes in their hand on long distances, and wear them only on special occasions.

said Abdul Rahman to himself, "the court peon is asking you to enter barefooted, and so appear respectful. Tell him you procured the shoes for that very purpose." He did as he was bidden by himself and walked in. When the Magistrate saw him he laughed. As he took his stand in the witness-box the Magistrate asked him why he had worn the *godri* round his neck. Abdul Rahman looked inwards and communicated the magistrate's question to himself in his usual fashion. "Brother Abdul Rahman," said the monitor, "you are in court now, therefore answer with due care. Tell the magistrate *sahib*<sup>7</sup> that it is a custom with the Hindus on important occasions to wear a *dupatta*<sup>8</sup> or a towel round the neck, and that you have done likewise." The instruction was duly communicated to the honourable magistrate by the self-same Abdul Rahman.

The *Sirishtedar*, a subordinate officer, now turned to Abdul Rahman to administer the usual oath: "In the presence of God I swear that I shall speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Abdul Rahman went through the formality with the same scrupulous adherence to his own mode of communication.

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7. An epithet of respect. S. Scarf.

“What is your name?”

“Brother Abdul Rahman, the *Sirishtedar* wants to know your name.”

“My name is Abdul Rahman.”

There was laughter in the court. The magistrate, after enjoying the situation for a while, showed annoyance. One of the advocates explained to him that the witness was in the habit of speaking thus.

“Your religion?” asked the subordinate officer.

Abdul Rahman half shut an eye in consideration. He sensed a warning from within. “Brother Abdul Rahman,” the monitor said, “you have sworn to speak the truth. The question is awkward. If you say you are a Muslim, the Hindus will take exception; if you answer you are a Hindu, the Muslims will frown. Brother Abdul Rahman, do not feel perplexed. Cut the Gordian knot by reciting from Saint Sachal the verse:

*“I am neither Hindu nor Muslim,  
I am what I am.”*

The *Sirishtedar* did not know if this answer would do for the record, so he turned to the magistrate for guidance.

“Write him down as a Muslim,” the magistrate ordered.

“Your age?”

Abdul Rahman whose communication with the outside world always took place through himself as a different entity, received both question and answer through that channel. “Tell him, Brother Abdul Rahman, that since the magistrate took upon himself to answer the previous question on your behalf, this question also might be addressed to the same quarter.”

The magistrate came down upon him like a dive-bomber.

“You *jat*!” he thundered, “will you make your statement sensibly and properly? Don’t forget you are in a law-court.”

A smile played on Abdul Rahman’s lips. He said, “Brother Abdul Rahman, the magistrate has called you a *jat*. Ask the magistrate *sahib* what is a *jat*.”

Before Abdul Rahman could address the magistrate directly that honourable gentleman shouted, “A *jat*, you fool, is an illiterate person.”

“Did you hear that, Brother Abdul Rahman? The magistrate *sahib* says a *jat* is a man who is illiterate. By this definition, Brother Abdul Rahman, surely you cannot be said to be a *jat*. You can read and write Sindhi, Per-

man, Urdu, Sanskrit and Hindi. Five languages. Will you ask the magistrate *sahib* how many languages he knows?"

Abdul Rahman turned to the magistrate to speak. But that august personage brushed him aside.

"A *jat* is one who does not know English," he said with a note of triumph in his voice, hoping to have crushed this queer customer.

There was whispering here and tittering there in the court.

Abdul Rahman's smile broadened visibly. He said to himself in a confidential, though audible tone, "Brother Abdul Rahman, the magistrate says a *jat* is one who does not know English. Though he himself knows English, he is the son of Topanmal, keeper of the cattle-pound. Will you ask the magistrate if his forefathers who knew no English were *jats*, and whether he himself is the son of a ...."

"None of your presumption, you insolent rascal", roared the magistrate. "Will you show cause why you should not be charged with contempt of court?"

He was further ordered to cease talking and to submit a written deposition.

Abdul Rahman stepped out of the witness-

box and going towards the table indicated, stooped over it and wrote off as follows :—

Honourable Magistrate *sahib*, Brother Abdul Rahman is not guilty of contempt of court. If anyone is guilty of that offence, it is you. On this day alone you have abused several witnesses. But your abusive language will not so much as touch the fringe of Brother Abdul Rahman's *godri*. Let me give you a bit of advice. Though you sit in judgment over the people, you are not their lord and master. You are their servant. We witnesses have not attended court of our own accord. We have been summoned to assist you in the administration of justice, and this is the treatment you mete out to us? Who will bother to appear in your court to give evidence if you shower abuse on the witnesses? Will you show cause why you should not be dismissed from service for contempt of court? Brother Abdul Rahman has in accordance with the oath administered to him by the court spoken the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help him God.

Signed: Brother Abdul Rahman  
Amarlal Hingorani

# The Apple

On Monday morning the child rose early from his bed and went to where his father lay still asleep. He was only eight and his name was Dhamoo. Softly he said in his father's ear, "It is Monday, *dada*,<sup>1</sup> will you bring it today?" His father jerked his eyes open, blinked and turned over his side as he said, "Yes, I'll bring it."

The child's face beamed with happiness. A little later he ran out and called, "Gopal! Gopal!" Gopal was the son of the rich *Seth* who lived in a neighbouring house. It was some time before Gopal came out. Eagerly the other boy ran up to him and said, "My *dada* will bring it today, you will see it in the evening."

The subject of that morning's short secret talk between father and son was an apple. A few days earlier Gopal had stood eating a large luscious red thing out on the road. Dhamoo stood at the door of his own house watching. He could not for long suppress his curiosity and soon went up and asked Gopal what he was

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1. Daddy.



eating. "An apple," came the proud reply. Dhamoo, with acute desire in his eyes, said, "Won't you give me some?" Gopal gobbled up the remaining piece, and when he could just about speak, he said, "My father has brought it for me, why don't you ask your father to bring you one?"

To this question of a rich man's son the son of an ordinary clerk with a salary of Rs. 35/- a month found no answer. He ran in to his father, looking sad. Godhumal was at the time just slipping into an old jacket in which the seams of many repairs were visible. He was about to go to the office. Dhamoo asked him to bring an apple for him on his return. Godhumal said, "Very well", and went out.

Evening came and Godhumal returned. His son ran out to meet him with extended hands. "My apple, *dada*?" he asked. Godhumal answered with mock surprise, "What? the apple? Oh, I....er....I quite forgot about your apple." Then patting him with affectionate deceit he added, "I'll bring you one tomorrow." The boy's face fell. But there was nothing for it to do and he said in hoarse resignation, "All right."

Godhumal had remembered the apple on his way back. He had passed by a number of

fruit-shops, but he had no money. He could have borrowed a few annas of a fellow-clerk but it would have been difficult to discharge the debt.

So to comfort his disappointed son he promised to bring one the next day. Dhamoo spent the whole of the day in expectation. His *dada* would certainly bring it that day. He would not forget to do so after forgetting it once before. There was no doubt whatever in the boy's mind. Some time before his father's hour of return he stood in the outer doorway, looking out on the road, the picture of a large red apple in his eyes. When would he come? The apple would come this time for sure, but would the *dada* ever come! Oh, there he was at last! The boy ran towards him. "*Dada* where is my apple?"

Godhumal put his hand in his pocket; the boy's eyes were agape with pleasure.

"I say! where's the....? How did I lose it?" It was the only way not to lose the boy's faith altogether. But the ruse tugged at the father's heart. It brought tears to his eyes. Dhamoo's face faded. He withdrew his hand from his father's and walked away to seek his mother. But a thought entered his mind and retracing his steps he said to his father, "*Dada*, how large was the apple?" Godhumal opened out

his hand into the shape of a bowl. "That big", he said with a faint smile. Dhamoo cried out, "Oh, that big!" Then he added, "*Dada*, will you bring it tomorrow?" Godhumal fell to thinking. What was the good of making a promise for the next day? He would not be able to keep it and it would break his heart and the child's.

The following Monday, he reflected, was pay-day, and he said, "No, son, I'll bring it on Monday again. See?" "After how many days is Monday, *dada*?" Dhamoo asked.

"After five days, son. I'll bring you two apples on Monday next. I promise."

Dhamoo seemed to expand in his clothes. He said, "*Dada*, bring big big ones and all red."

"Yes, my son."

Dhamoo's joy knew no bounds. He went bouncing like a ball to his mother and shouted, "Mother, *dada* will bring me two big apples on Monday." She turned to her husband and said, "Look at him skipping! What will he feel like when he really gets them?"

On his way to the office the following Monday Godhumal stopped at a fruit-shop, selected two large, attractive apples, settled the price and requested the dealer to put them away, saying that he would call and pay for

them on his way back in the evening. They were the finest of the lot. Godhumal began to picture the joy his son would show that evening on seeing the apples. At the office all day the picture stayed deep down in his mind, though he was aware of it only in the form of a feeling. The bustle of the other clerks towards the end of the day was a sign of payment of salaries. Godhumal hurriedly finished his work and went to the cashier who informed him that the *Sahib* had ordered that Godhumal's salary should be held up. He could have been knocked down with a feather. He turned to the head clerk who told him the reason : his work was in arrears. Godhumal wanted to speak and make an appeal, but he felt choked. He felt like having received a stunning blow in his chest. He could only say, "Sir...."

"You know what the boss is like," said the head clerk. "I am sorry I can't do anything. I wish I could. Better go and see him yourself."

Godhumal timidly entered the room of the European gentleman, approached humbly, with only half life in him and no spirit. He said something about his poverty, about the many mouths he had to feed.

The *Sahib* was busy packing presents to

his children and had no time for him. He told him bluntly to be off and not to bother him. It was the only way to correct lazy fellows, he said.

Tears flowed out of Godhumal's eyes. With extreme humility he said, "Sir, I shall dispose of all the arrears anyhow tomorrow."

"Well, do it and you will be paid the day after," said the boss firmly.

"*Huzoor*<sup>2</sup>, would you be so good as to order only a couple of rupees to be paid to me now?" Godhumal requested.

"Not a pie till you have finished the work," said the boss with finality. As he said these words he wrote on the two packets: "For Harry," "For Mary." The two children were schooling at Loretto's in Simla.

Godhumal retraced his steps, breathing heavily. On coming out of the chief's room he fell to thinking. Should he approach the head clerk for a loan of a rupee? But the very thought was disagreeable. In his misery he suddenly felt like hating the whole world. And to ask for a rupee? What would the head clerk think of him? He would feel so mortified. How would he word his request, if he made it? It was too much. He could never bring himself

to do it. He gave it up, and coming out of the office mechanically walked homeward. But the thought of his son and his expectation, his eager anticipation of the apples, ate into his mind. The boy had kept reminding him all day on Sunday. And now, "*Dada* will soon be here," he must be saying to himself. The little fellow must be waiting outside the house, looking in his direction, as he had done before. What hopes he must be in! Godhumal kept seeing him sprint towards him and pop out his hands. Oh God! why this extreme poverty and wretchedness? To be unable to buy an apple for an only son—an apple! When there are so many about. He felt his destitution as he had never felt it before. His life had always been a struggle. Starting with a pay of Rs. 20/- a month he had now reached the figure of Rs. 35/-. It had been such a painfully slow promotion. It had meant so much self-denial, so many needs—not comforts—unsatisfied. But he had never felt their sharp pang as he did now when he thought of his only son's, a child's, unfulfilled desire of many days, which would hardly cost a few annas. All the love that he bore his son and had never opportunities of translating into little things which all children are fond of, the love of which he had perhaps, therefore, not been aware before, now welled up in him. It awoke a new tender-

ness, a father's tenderness, which he had not experienced so long. But it stabbed him like a knife. It was a new phase of fatherhood for him.

A passing *mazdoor*'s<sup>3</sup> soft palm-leaf basket suddenly brushed his side and made him aware of the fruit shops on both sides of the road. His mind received a jerk. He stopped. There were lovely-looking apples displayed in each one of the shops. He saw afresh the small hands of his child held out. He distinctly heard the words, "*Dada*, where are my apples?" His mind was in a whirl. Almost like a sleep-walker, he was carried by his legs to one of the shops. He picked up the nearest two and walked away. But the dealer, at first flabbergasted, was soon after him, shouting, "Thief! catch the thief!" and raising a shindy. What happened thereafter Godhumal was too dazed to know. When he came to himself he found he was behind the bars.

Over at home, Dhamoo had stood outside looking for his father since 5 o'clock. It struck six, six-thirty, seven, seven-thirty, still there was no sign of his father. Many other men coming from a distance he hopefully imagined to be his father, but when he approached them

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3. Cooly, literally a labourer.

they turned out to be different men. His patience exhausted, tired out and deeply disappointed, he went back home and waited there. Eight o'clock ! Soon it was time for dinner and bed. He tried to keep awake but sleep was overpowering him. He said to his mother, "*Ama*<sup>4</sup> dear, will you wake me up when *dada* comes ?" His mother was beginning to be anxious too. But, it was pay-day and perhaps he had got late shopping, she reflected.

While the boy slept and dreamed that his pockets held two beautiful big apples, the police inspector was drawing up a report of the charge against Godhumal.

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#### 4. Mummy.



# The Brahmin's Wife

All her friends called her "cowherdess", though not in her presence. *Kiki*<sup>1</sup> was not a cowherdess by occupation. Her husband had two or three cows whose milk he sold. It was his source of income.

Her name was not *Kiki*, either. She was hardly twelve when her parents married her to a Brahmin boy of twenty-five, and she had a delicate constitution. On that account her parents-in-law, in the first days of her marriage, started calling her *Kiki*. The name, very commonly used in Sind, stuck to her.

Her husband, though a Brahmin, was Brahmin only in name. He had not read the *Vedas* and the *Shastras*, the ancient Hindu Scriptures, in either Sanskrit, its modern off-shoot Hindi, or his mother-tongue Sindhi. At first he lived on the fees paid to every Brahmin by his special panel of followers. They had always fed him well on auspicious days, and the cash payments had enabled him to live comfortably. But after the Great War of 1914-18 it ceased to be plain sailing. Whether

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1. Little girl—a pet name.

the number of followers went down, or they had lost faith in religious rites, or there was some other reason, it is difficult to say. The ugly fact remained that the income was falling and since he was utterly uneducated, having learnt neither his own time-honoured language and literature, nor any modern secular vocation which might help him in life, he had taken to this common mode of eking out a living with the help of a few cows.

*Kiki* was now eighteen. Youth had flowered in her somewhat late, which was perhaps due to a delicate body and a frail constitution. But on reaching the age of eighteen she experienced a sudden outburst of sensations of body and mind. Unfortunately, however, before sweet and delicate impulses were thus aroused she had experienced life's fulfilment with her husband. Of course, one might very well ask what need or use there was of sweet and delicate impulses and sentiments in a life such as hers. These are aroused in an atmosphere of culture which like the sun-flower shoots up and seeks the sun of eternal truth. The place where she lived was devoid of all culture and even the desire for it.

She had hardly spent a year or two in a tornado of new emotions and fierce physical sensations when her attitude towards her

husband began to change imperceptibly. She felt an aversion for his rude and uncultured ways. When she heard him speak to anyone loudly, harshly or abusively, like any other common man, she felt keenly humiliated. As if somebody had cut off her nose. When he came and slept by her at night, there issued from him a nauseating smell of cowdung and urine which, it seemed to her, emanated from him in endless waves. It was nothing new. She had breathed in this smell for years, but now her senses were suddenly sharpened, she became supersensitive, and felt suffocated. She tried to remonstrate with herself. To a Hindu wife, her husband was or should be like a god. However ugly, deformed or immoral he may be, the scriptures enjoin on her the duty to love and worship him, to attend on him, and to consider him above all other men, in all respects. This feeling was ingrained in her from her childhood. It had behind it centuries of honoured tradition. That was the idea instilled into her in her parents' home. She remembered this instruction, administered daily in diverse ways, direct and indirect, and tried hard to conform to this teaching and so restore peace to her mind. She never failed in her duties and continued to study her husband's pleasure. But—self-effacement at such an age! How could she succeed always? There were times

when she had no manual work to do, and perforce there was rumination and gloom. It was involuntary, and she made a conscious effort, a tremendous effort to overcome the demon of discontent. But the demon came riding on waves and would sweep away her outworn notions of wifehood. Her self-control would like a reed be broken into pieces, and there would follow such an upsurge of revolt in her mind, raising dark and difficult questions, that she would give way to a violent spasm of tears. These questions, however, because of her training, seldom had a chance of entering the orbit of her consciousness as regular questions; their existence was only vaguely felt, they were never formulated.

Many a time, when she saw other men, *Kiki* caught herself experiencing a curious thrill of pleasure which never failed to register itself upon her face. What was it she found pleasing in them? Clean clothes, a shaven beard, well-dressed hair, a smart gait, refined speech—in short, all that was wanting in her husband. *Kiki* was not really aware of these reasons of her pleasure at the sight of some other men. If you had asked her, she would never have admitted that she felt any kind of desire for any man other than her husband.

In her domestic life she never experienced

an exciting moment. But when there was no domestic work to do and she came out and sat on the doorstep to watch the people come and go, and she saw some educated, well groomed and smart young men pass by, she would think of their wives and envy them. A mild wave of pleasure would swell up in her mind, which, however, would soon be succeeded and overwhelmed by another, a bigger one ; for soon she would be on her guard, remembering the Hindu ideal of a wife.

Her parents had been well-to-do. Being Brahmins they also depended chiefly on the income from their *yajmans*, their clients. But they were well-versed in the *Vedas*. Her people from that point of view were not like her husband, worthless Brahmins, Brahmins in name, Brahmins by the accident of birth only. The atmosphere in her parents' home had been different. The place did not reek of fodder and dung and urine ; rather it was surcharged, as a Brahmin's home should be, with the fragrance of incense and ambergris, flowers and sandalwood. Instead of scandal and loud conversation, there one heard religious discussion and a refined and courteous tone of speech. Poor *Kiki* ! what vile trick had fate played her, to have flung her from such a height to such an abyss !

Sometimes she would escape from her surroundings with the help of her imagination, cutting herself away from the mean bonds of her daily existence by indulging in day-dreams. In that imaginary world she breathed the stimulating air of freedom. There she did not feel cooped up in a small compass, as in her husband's home. She always saw herself in vast, open spaces where she experienced a corresponding limitlessness in her own being. All around was emerald-green with grass, stretching away for miles and miles in all directions. She had an intense dislike for bare ground and would have, if she had the power, given colour to every inch of it. Over the green expanse of her imagination waved and sparkled flowers of many hues, blowing about such a fragrance as God's own world has 'never' known. She would see herself reclining against a tall palm, her cheek resting on the smooth trunk, arms flung around it and her hands moving over it in a soft caress. Her heart would then break into ripples and her face would shine with supreme happiness.

One day, while in that state of unreal existence, she saw herself worshipping before a marble image of the *linga* (phallus) of Lord

Shiva<sup>2</sup>. She sat in that worshipful state for a long time, her head bowed, eyes closed, and hands folded and touching the *linga*. The prayer ended, she opened her eyes in that imaginary world and saw that the *linga* had been transformed into a man. With a rude shock she suddenly got up from the prayerful attitude. But the look in that male's eyes and the smile on his lips had such a devastating effect on her weakened will, that instead of running away she flung herself into his arms. Thereafter, there passed for her moments of golden glory, and she drank, as it were, draughts of intoxicating ecstasy. When these moments had spent themselves and she came out of the state of rapturous fulfilment, and her mate began to melt into the thin air from which he had taken shape, she saw that his face looked exactly like her father's! Suddenly she thought she saw and heard a hideous witch chuckling horribly and malignantly at her heinous experience. It brought her back to earth. The vision fled from her eyes and she returned, full of remorse, to the consciousness of her gross existence—never again to indulge in day-dreams and live another life in wide spaces, bright with colour.

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2. Worship of the *linga* of Lord Shiva as a symbol of creative power is enjoined by Hindu religion, as well as by other ancient faiths in different forms.

A terrible fear, whose roots lay deep in social and religious custom, held her in check thereafter.

Fate also suddenly showed mercy. One day a maddened cow charged her husband, lifted him on her horns and dashed him to the ground with a sickening thud. It dislocated his knee and nearly broke his neck, and he lay in bed for several months. This misfortune of her husband proved a blessing for her. The battle between her dreams and her loathsome existence was shattering her mind. At any time her nervous system might have been deranged and one more woman would have become the victim of hysteria.

This sudden calamity of her husband aroused a new emotion in her—the mother's, which seeks to give protection. She devoted to the service of her husband all the powers, physical and mental, with which nature has endowed woman for the protection and rearing of her children. He was no longer her husband and bread-winner. He was more feeble and helpless than a child. Without her mother-like nursing and care he would not have survived. With a mother's devotion *Kiki* kept herself so occupied in the service of her husband that all other longings were swallowed up by her one passion of service. She felt a.



new desire to live, and this desire infused a happiness through her whole being. The fancies in which she had taken refuge from her crushed and empty existence visited her no longer. She found deliverance now in the gratification of her motherly instincts. A new emotion was born in her heart from which flowed such a spring of love as left no room for other needs, physical or mental. This was love which had no trace of the senses in it, and which asked for no return. *Kiki* had never before experienced such a sacred love.

Yes, from a wife *Kiki* had suddenly become a mother—without bearing a child. But it saved her life.

Assanand Mamtara

## What a Story!

"Late again?"

"Sorry."

"Last night too you were late."

"Yes, I was."

"It must be at least two o'clock."

"Yes....it must be that."

"Perhaps it is three."

"Perhaps it is."

"Where were you?"

"Oh, hereabouts."

"Then, what made you so late?"

"It just got late."

"While I sat up waiting anxiously."

"You needn't have."

"Oh!....very well, I won't in future."

"Thanks."

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"Have you had your dinner?"

"Yes, I have had my dinner."

"What time did you have it?"

"Quite early."

"What did you have?"

"Oh, whatever was available."

"Where?"

"At the nearest."

"Is it so very wrong to ask?"

"What's right about it?"

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"You weren't like this before."

"Who?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"What's wrong with me now?"

"Ask yourself."

"What?"

"What is wrong with you."

"I am the same as before."

"Oh, indeed! perhaps you will say next that I have changed!"

"Who knows, you may have."

"Whoever thought that this would happen one day!"

"Whoever did?"

"That I should have to keep waiting till three o'clock in the morning!"

"Why do you wait?"

"Then, you won't cease gadding about?"

"Where do I gad about?"

"How do I know?"

"You think I was gadding about tonight?"

"What else?"

"Quite right, my dear, I gad about till three in the morning. I am a rotter."

"Oh, no, you are just too good."

"Oh, no, I am just too bad. I have all the vices one can think of."

"No, you are just wonderful—so considerate and loving. I am to blame."

"Not at all! You are....what should I say....so docile, forbearing, contented...."

"And you—always thinking about your wife and child, you couldn't hurt anyone."

"And you...."

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"Oh, I can't bear it, I can't bear it!"

"Well, don't."

"But I suppose I shall have to as long as I am alive."

"What about me?"

"What grievance have you?"

"And you?"

"God knows what I have to put up with."

"Doesn't He know what I have to put up with?"

"Have you no fear of God?"

"More than you have."

"Oh, God! What should I do? I can't even die."

"For the love of God, don't shout."

"Who's shouting? You are shouting."

"You'll wake up the baby."

"A fat lot you care for the baby."

"Not less than you do."

"And yet, you hardly bother to know how he is."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you care how he is?"

"Why, isn't he well?"

"I am saying what do you care?"

"I want to know if he is well."

"Gadding about with...."

"Will you answer my question?"

"What question?"

"How's baby?"

"Indeed! You've turned very anxious all of a sudden, haven't you? At three o'clock in the morning."

"Woman, what am I asking?"

"As if you were terribly fond of him!"

"Not less than you, haven't I told you?"

"Even then you go about till three?"

"Go about? where?"

"How should I know?"

"I don't go about."

"Then what do you do till three o'clock?"

"Who says it is three o'clock?"

"Well, what time is it, then?"

"It is not even two o'clock."

"Who says?"

"I do."

"Liar!"

" You call me a liar ! "

" Oh, not so loud, please ! "

" Why, isn't the baby perfectly well ? "

" Why 'perfectly' ? "

" Your manner makes me anxious. "

" Well, I hope your love for baby at least never fades. "

" So you think my love has faded ? "

" Oh, no ! you are so steadfast ! "

" You bet. "

" You're steadfast in nothing but torturing me. "

" And you—in endurance ? "

" What reason have you to be sore ? "

" Oh, none whatever. "

" Then why complain ? "

" Who complained ? "

" What ! didn't you ? "

" Oh, you're impossible ! "

( *Sniff...Sniff....* )

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" And what's hurting *you* ? "

" Oh, what's the good ! "

" I'd like to know. "

" Hm ! Returning home at three o'clock and....and....now trying to show sympathy. "

" I said it is not three o'clock. "

" Well, two o'clock then. "

" Yes....two. "

" Why so late ? "

"I had been to Chandiram's".

"Chandiram's? Honest?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe it."

"I swear—by you."

"A fat lot you care for me."

"Now, be honest, tell me...."

"What?"

"Don't I love you?"

"Sh!....speak low, you'll disturb baby's sleep."

"How peacefully he sleeps!"

"Hands clenched."

"Teeny-weeny hands—so delicate."

"Little mouth, half-open like a rose-bud."

"And hair—falling over his face."

"Like yours."

"Like....!"

"And now he's smiling."

"Sweet-heart!"

"Darling!"

# The Poet

There was magic in Babu Inder Nath's pen. Whenever he took it up fountains of literary nectar poured out of its point. He was not very old either. About forty-five. But his soaring imagination and his colourful ideas were a source of perpetual wonder and delight to his readers. The most commonplace things were transformed into something rich and strange when bathed in the glow of his imagination. The most insignificant subject he infused with glorious life. The effect of his poetry on all his readers was literally one of magic. Reading it they did not feel themselves of this world. It was what some modernists contemptuously call "escapist" poetry, the poetry of the "ivory towers", but it was not, like some poetry of this class, sickly and sickening. The readers, one and all, could not help being impressed by the profound thoughts that were embedded in the "jewelled phrase" and the striking metaphor. Once in it, it was difficult to lay it down. His books were on that account eagerly awaited. His poetry had every great quality in it, the one pervading it being simplicity. He never tried to create an impression



by the use of bombastic, brain-splitting words. He instinctively disliked this mode of writing as being insincere and bogus. Whatever he had to say found spontaneous expression in simple language. But, strange as it may seem, he was not much known a year before our story opens. He had as it were suddenly sprung into fame and now the whole Hindi-speaking world was crazy about him. There was hardly a village so unfortunate as not to possess a few copies of his "*Bhao Sushma*" and "*Som Sagar*", which were his latest and most popular works.

But in spite of so much fame the question of a living still vexed him. He never had enough and was often unhappy on that account. And, incredible as it may seem, hardly any one knew the sad plight of this so much talked-of poet, this "*Sare-taj*", the crown of the people. No one knew how much every pice meant to him. His publishers minted money, but his own lot—such is the state of literature and the fate of authors, particularly poets, in India—was grinding poverty and starvation. This treatment by the world often embittered him and sometimes he would fiercely tear up his new poems and break his steel pen into pieces, and mutter, "Oh, damn! Why write at all?"

## 2.

It was morning. Inder Nath sat in the sunlight that generously poured in through the window. He sat reclining in a deck-chair, so often used in poor Indian homes, and read a monthly magazine. His wife, Manorama, who was sweeping the floor, turned in his direction and asked him to move a bit so that she could sweep under his chair, and caught him smiling cryptically. The palm-leaf broom held in her hand, she said, "What is it that makes you smile ?

Inder Nath gave her a tender look and said, "*Bhao-Sushma*, a review of it. He has praised it sky-high."

Manorama was happy to hear this, but doubted if people really understood his work.

"How so ? " Inder Nath asked in astonishment.

"It is a fact," she said with emphasis, giving her broom a rest. "People are great idiots. They have not the intelligence to recognise your worth. Truly does the proverb say, 'What does the sheep know about music whose only language is *Baa*'." She really loved her husband and held him in high esteem, in spite of her disappointments. A typical, old time, Hindu wife.

Her husband replied that there was only one person who really understood him. She asked who that person was.

"You won't feel jealous if I tell you? It's a lady," he said. "I have not met her equal in sympathy and understanding, no, not even among men."

Manorama's look lost its placid calm. She was a little troubled, just a little ruffled. She knew him to be a perfect gentleman, a good and upright man, a straight husband. Still she asked, "May I ask who this friend of yours is?"

"Shrimati Manorama Devi," he answered, looking at her with deep affection.

She gave a little laugh and looked away in modesty, exclaiming at the same time, "You are a nice one! What an occasion for a joke!"

"No, my dear, sweet Manorama," he said with slow and tender emphasis on the adjectives, "it is my genuine opinion."

"Now, now," she said in protest, "you are the limit in telling fibs."

"I am quite sure," he replied, "that I would never have progressed without your encouragement. In fact, I would have thrown it up."

"So you think I could read your future?" she asked.

"I don't know about that", he said simply. "But I was certainly not aware of the worth of my work. Anyway, would you care to listen to the review?"

"Oh, yes!" she replied beaming with secret pride.

Inder Nath read: "*Bhao-Sushma* has made exciting reading. One is literally lifted to another world, at once strange and delightful. Its beauty and simplicity of expression are of course remarkable, but even more striking is the profundity of its thought. Its exquisite versification makes it more than poetry, it endows it with the quality of music."

"Well?" he asked with a thrill of pleasure which had also registered itself in Manorama's wide-open eyes.

Somebody shouted from outside: "Babu Inder Nath!" It was like the sudden snapping of music strings, or like a sharp cry piercing their exquisite notes.

Babu Inder Nath putting the magazine down on the *charpai*<sup>1</sup> went out, and Manorama resumed her sweeping. When he returned after a few minutes he looked cheerless.

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1. Cot, light bedstead.

"Who was it?"

"The landlord."

Her face fell. "What did he say? Can't he wait for a few days?"

He came and sat down in the deck-chair. Looking vacantly away he answered that the man threatened to file a suit.

"For three months' rent?" With a sigh she added, "How can we square up the account when we haven't any money?"

He hardly heard. Lost in his thought, he said bitterly, "A poet! God Almighty! What do I get out of it? Verbal coins which can't be converted into food and rent!" Then turning to his wife he added in mockery, "Pity we can't eat a chunk of this fine review for breakfast and offer some of it to the landlord."

There was a long pause. Manorama had again suspended her sweeping. She sat on the floor, her left hand held to her temple, the right still gripping the broom. Infinite is the capacity of the Indian woman for suffering though tears will come easily to her eyes. But Manorama was an Indian woman who seldom gave way to the emotion of tears. She just asked quietly, "What do you propose to do?"

He was calm by now. "I have been thinking over the problem for some time. I think I'll go and look for a job. This hourly anxiety is unbearable."

She looked up at him. "Try it, by all means. Only you will not be able for long to keep away from writing. I am not an educated woman in the modern sense of the word. But some of the truly great books are our ancient books and from these I know that a poet writes because he must."

"You do not know me sufficiently well, then. If it's got to be done I must do it and will. What else is there to it? How long can we go on like this?" She had put him on his mettle.

"I do not presume to set myself up as a judge over my husband," she said, "but could you stick to office work?"

"If it brings in sufficient money, why not?"

"Would you put up with rebukes and all manner of treatment from those under whom you may have to work?"

"I'd have to", he said, "and I wouldn't hear worse than I do from the landlord, in any case."

"And the people, do you know what they will say? 'Oh! we thought he was a poet and a great thinker, but he turned out to be an ordinary clerk! Only a clerk, just imagine!' Now, though poor, you reign in their hearts like a god. Then, they will point at you in derision. Will you be able to bear it?"

"I shall tell myself that they are talking of some one else," he said. With mounting passion he added, "Anyway, what else is there to do? How long can we go on as we are? My publishers are bent upon exploiting me because they know others will not treat me better. They are all like that. They are capitalists, and not interested in literature or the writer's merit. It is different in Europe and America. There, I should have had a small palace of gold by now."

She rose from the floor and came up to him and placed her hand on his shoulders. "You mustn't lose hope," she said, "have faith in God. By all means go and look for a job. I only wanted you to know what you would be in for, so that you should be prepared for it."

His two hands closed round hers. He loved his wife, she had been a great support and a companion, and she loved him and knew his worth. She had shared his poverty without grumbling. She would not have had him

be different—not for the whole world. She was proud of him and proud to be the wife of a man who could think and feel and write as he did. Riches? What were riches without culture, without nobility of nature, without the love of truth and beauty? She regarded these as her compensation, in secret. She continued to struggle but she did so together with her husband. And he could not but treasure such a companion. He looked up into her eyes tenderly.

“You are always right, you angel,” he said. “Yes, I think I shall go and see Lala Rangi Lal. He is a nice man and might take me into his business.

“Flatter him a little,” she advised, “all men of position like flattery.”

“I’ll try,” he said. “Yes, he is the right man to go to. He could easily find me a place if he felt inclined. Do find me fresh clothes, these are too crumpled.”

Manorama went and opened his trunk. It contained only an odd assortment of old clothes, by no means presentable. Such was the poet’s wardrobe! He had a few others, which were with the *dhobi*<sup>2</sup>. She turned to him and



they stood facing each other in silence. He bit his lip, suffering keen humiliation.

"So this is your famous poet, my dear," he said, "eagerly read in the remotest parts of the country, whose poetry moves the most prosaic, whose diction fills other poets with wonder and envy, this poet of yours in search of a petty job of Rs. 50/- a month, who has no change of clothes!"

Manorama sat down on the floor and buried her head in her hands. With deep anguish she thought of his mortification.

### 3.

An hour later Babu Inder Nath entered Lala Rangi Lal's office. The walk had done him good, as it was mid-winter and the sun shone in a clear blue sky, and there was an agreeable nip yet in the air. He felt braced up. Lalaji<sup>3</sup> was busy reading a book, and indicating a chair said, "Excuse me a few minutes, will you? Just a few pages."

The sensitive nature of Babu Inder Nath squirmed under this reception. Blood rushed to his face. That Lalaji should value his own time but not another man's! If this was his treatment now, what would it be like when he

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3. *Ji* is a suffix courteously added to all Indian names irrespective of age and sex.

was his paid servant? He was about to leave when the landlord's red face flashed before him and his threat of a civil suit rang in his ears. It was as if an invisible force had seized a flying piece of paper and clamped it down under a paper-weight.

Lala Rangi Lal closed the Book gently. But he did not turn to Babu Inder Nath. He had already shut his eyes and was lost in thought, and in that state he expressed his admiration in exclamations: "Lovely! What profundity of thought! What diction!"

Babu Inder Nath sat up and wondered what kind of man this was. Lala Rangi Lal, still holding the book, turned to the visitor.

"Yes, what can I do for you?" he said.

Before Babu Inder Nath could open his mouth the door opened and a gentleman in English dress entered.

"Good morning", he said.

"Good morning", said Lala Rangi Lal, as he rose from his chair to shake hands with the new visitor. "Come and sit down."

"Thanks", said the visitor, as he drew up a chair. "It's such a fine morning. It's a morning for an outing, not for business or reading as you seem to have been doing. What book is that?"

Evidently a man with a keen sense of life.

Babu Inder Nath felt ignored, but here was an interesting talk and he quietly sat and listened.

"This is a book of Hindi poems," Lala Rangi Lal answered.

"What is it like?"

Lala Rangi Lal handed it to the gentleman, saying, "Beyond praise."

"Really? You have liked it then?"

"Liked! I've never read anything like it. It bears the impress of genius, it is poetry that will live."

The visitor was turning over the leaves. "I am not much of a judge of Hindi poetry, he said. "I have read the best English poetry in my younger days. Keats, Shelley and a host of others. Nothing like it has been written in any other tongue. I think our Hindi poetry must be very poor. modern Hindi poetry. I mean."

"The proof of the pudding lies in the eating," Lala Rangi Lal said, with a smile. "Take this book with you and read it. It will open your eyes. The trouble with men like you is that you are too westernised and therefore cannot appraise the worth of your own culture."

"Hm! is that so?" said the visitor in half-mockery. Then looking at the cover of the book he read, "*Bhao-Sushma*."

Babu Inder Nath sat up and pricked up his ears.

"Sounds good and pleasing," the visitor said.

"You read the inside and see how it sounds. It will thrill you," Lala Rangi Lal remarked.

Babu Inder Nath did not hear the rest.

There was something dancing in him like a proud peacock when it opens out its beautiful fan-tail. It danced with silver bells round its ankles. He heard their music. He was no longer in the rich magnate's office. The picture of the terrible landlord no longer frightened him. This world with all the material things it had to offer was too brittle to bother about. It was like a sparrow that comes and goes. Was it worth while caging a sparrow? Why should he run after a few silver coins and give up his divine mission of imparting joy to humanity? Lala Rangi Lal, curiously enough, had all along talked about the book, not mentioning the poor poet, the man who wrote it, even once. But in his heart he must hold him in great affection. And Lalaji, who had experienced

a new sensation reading his poems and must in his mind have formed at least a vague picture of the poet, quite unlike that of any other human being in his experience, what must this same Lala Rangi Lal feel, how disillusioned he would be if confronted by a man in old clothes, come to beg for a job in his office! He would feel robbed and mocked and would never forgive him. He might, out of pity or perhaps contempt, offer him a small job to have his revenge. How could he, Babu Inder Nath, then continue to hold his head high? Ouf! He thought of Manorama.

He rose noiselessly from the chair, and walked out, a different man. He felt a tingling sensation as the cool breeze fanned his face. There appeared a new light in it, and a new glow in his eyes. His heart was in blossom and the external breeze seemed to play with it. The same peace and repose, the same poise in the midst of the world's buffetings, which he seemed to have lost, now descended on him and he walked away crowned with an inward glory, the glory which the Indian sage finds in meditation, in forests and mountains only. .

## 4.

"Did you succeed," Manorama asked. "You look as if you have! Has it made you so happy?"

"Beyond measure," he replied. "I have succeeded beyond measure and I am happy beyond measure."

"Oh, God be praised! We shall have a fixed income at last! How much?" she asked.

"Don't ask," he returned gently. "I feel overwhelmed."

"What! You won't tell *me*?" she said.

He narrated to her the whole episode, and said in the end, "My dear Manorama, I have rejected the job, but I have learnt a precious truth. I had forgotten myself, but now I know that the poet ranks highest in the human scale. He reigns over the hearts of men, waking up the sleeping and quickening the dead. The whole world lives and dies for itself. The poet lives for humanity. He revives lost courage, dries up flowing tears, and brings hope to the defeated. He is the real builder of his nation. Others die, but he lives on in his words. His life is immortal. I have made my choice."

## The Gate-Keeper

It was at Rangpur Station. Three railway officials stood involved in a discussion. A crowd of men from distant villages, would-be passengers, and women about to travel by train for the first time, were from their own different groups looking at the three men and whispering to one another.

"But who is the gate-keeper at the railway-crossing here?" The speaker's manner showed that the other two were his subordinates. The tallest of the three, middle-aged and dry-faced, answered humbly, "Sir, the same man who has been in charge of it for the last thirty years."

"What! the same man for thirty years?"

The third, who in status seemed between the two, nodded in corroboration.

"And you two expect satisfactory work from a man of that kind?" asked the officer in surprise, digging his cane into the earth. The other two were silent for a while. Then the middle-aged one said, "Sir, he is an old man. After thirty years' service here, where

can he possibly go? It is only fair that he should end his days where he began."

The officer drew in his lips and frowned. He bent his cane and threw up a loose stone with its end. Then he said, "We are not concerned with persons but with their work. We cannot bother about his future." The middle-aged man's face became more dry. He had a kind heart. He had entered railway service as an ordinary clerk and was now Station Master of Rangpur. He owed this promotion to no crooked methods, but had risen by doing his work consistently well under different officers. He had no brilliance about him. He was just good and honest and well-meaning. Seeing the officer's lips compressed, he said more humbly than before, "Sir, Badrinath has been gate-keeper for *thirty* years! He deserves some consideration."

"What is his age?" the officer asked.

"Fifty-seven or fifty-eight, Sir."

"Then he is decidedly not capable of discharging his duties to satisfaction," said the officer with finality.

The Station Master understood that it would not do to argue further. The officer was not in a good mood. Later, he might relent.



This is how the matter had started. A mile from the station was a railway-crossing. Badrinath, as the reader has already been informed, had been its gate-keeper for thirty years. On one recent occasion, when a train was passing by, he had forgotten to close the gate. It was in this connection that the above conversation had taken place, between the Traffic Superintendent, the Traffic Inspector and the Station Master.

When the train arrived, the Traffic Superintendent walked away towards his special coach. After getting into it he said to the Station Master, "We shall have to appoint some experienced and alert fellow to this post." His last few words were absorbed by the train-whistle. The other two *salaamed*<sup>1</sup> as the train moved.

Vinayak Rao, the Station Master, used to take a daily evening stroll in the direction of the gate. His silver-handled walking stick, his old, carefully-preserved silk *duppata*<sup>2</sup>, his Decani turban and *chaplis*<sup>3</sup>, has done this daily round for ten years now. He often went and sat for some time in Badrinath's hut, and the old man, on seeing Vinayak Rao, would emerge from his small vegetable plot with a glass of

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1. Saluted. 2. Scarf. 3. Sandals.

water which he would place respectfully before him. The two would then fall to chatting about their personal affairs, their little joys and sorrows. So the evening would be spent.

On the evening of the 'Traffic Superintendent's visit, Vinayak Rao strolled in the direction of the hut as usual. This time his pace was slower. His mind was troubled. When he reached the hut he did not see the old man in his vegetable patch. He went and occupied his usual seat, lost in thought, surveying the old man's handiwork, the plants and the trees and vegetables in the enclosure behind the hut. Over the arched entrance to this enclosure trailed a flower creeper. On one side of this garden grew spices and chillies. Near by grew two or three *tulsi*<sup>4</sup> plants. In the centre of the enclosure was a small open space plastered with cow-dung and kept beautifully clean for the goat tethered there. Vinayak Rao was struck by this creation of the old man more than ever before.

Suddenly a girl of ten or eleven came out of the hut, but seeing Vinayak Rao she went in again and said to the old man, "Grandpa, there is a man waiting out' for you." The old man came out, looking rather weak. Vinayak

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4. Sacred plant of the Hindus.

Rao had not called for the last few days and the old man had not been too well either. The gate-keeper asked the child to go and bring a glass of water for *Rao Sahib*, and came and sat near the Station Master. A few kittens had followed him and rubbed their bodies against the old man.

Vinayak Rao felt his heart torn. It was only today he fully realised how much this place meant to the old man. It was his life's work. It bore the stamp of his labour and skill, it was — the man himself. Today, however, Vinayak Rao saw something else besides — the little girl. He asked who she was.

"Oh, that's Shanta," the old man replied. "She is the daughter of the *mali*<sup>5</sup> in charge of the garden across the road. For the last few days she has milked the goat for me. God bless her."

Shanta brought out a shining *lotā*<sup>6</sup> full of water. She looked so attractive with antinomy in her eyes that Vinayak Rao could not take his eyes off her.

"I am off now, Grandpa," she said.

"Did you milk Motil?" the old man asked. Motil was the name of the goat.

<sup>5</sup> A Government title, loosely applied to all officials by ignorant villagers.      <sup>6</sup> Gardener.

<sup>7</sup> A small vessel of metal or earthenware.

"Yes," she replied.

"Very well, then," said the old man. "But, come early tomorrow."

She went but came back presently and said, "Grandpa, it will be *Divali*<sup>8</sup> after four days. Will you require ground wheat for the sweat-meat?"

The old man smiled and said, "No, I do not think I shall bother about it."

"Oh, but you must. Everyone else will eat sweet things."

"Very well, then," said the old man. "Take some wheat out of the hut. But don't grind it too thick."

"Oh, I do it quite well now, I'll turn it out fine." Then she left.

Vinayak Rao was touched by the little girl's solicitude for the old man. He said to him gently, "*Kaka*<sup>9</sup>, don't you think you should retire from service now? You can hardly work at this age. After such a long service you deserve rest."

"Oh, but I hardly have another few years to live."

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8. Hindu Festival of Lamps, annually celebrated in honour of Rama's return home after 14 years of banishment; (for details read the Hindu epic *Ramayana*).

9. Uncle.

"That is why I suggest that you retire now and spend the rest of your life in prayer and rest."

"And who is to support me in this old age? My son died in the last plague. My wife ran away. I am alone now. So as long as there is life in this frail body I must work to eat." He spoke quietly.

Vinayak Rao suffered more keenly. As he rose to leave he felt that the gate-keeper's attachment to his hut and the little plot was greater than a mother's for its child.

The next day the Traffic Inspector looked in to see the Station Master, and asked him what action he had taken.

"I find it so hard to dismiss the man," said Vinayak Rao with a troubled voice. "You see, Mr. Prabhakar, the man is utterly alone in the world, and if dismissed, he will have nowhere to go for shelter."

Mr. Prabhakar said that was all very well. He did not wish to be cruel, but the man's work, though simple, was of a most delicate nature, and if he was too old, it would be so much the more difficult to retain him. "I should like to help him, but I have orders," he said.

"Cannot something be done?" Vinayak Rao pleaded. "I am sure your recommendation

would have effect, Mr. Prabhakar! Please do it for my sake. Let him have another chance."

Prabhakar thought for a moment. Then he said, "I think it would be very risky, Mr. Vinayak Rao. You admit that he is too old. Well, then, what else is there to do but to retire him? This is not private service in which personal considerations might be permissible. The last time he forgot to close the gate there was fortunately no traffic over the crossing. What if the next time there should be? Then both you and I would be responsible, and we might come in for a share of trouble. No, I am afraid he will have to go."

Vinayak Rao saw the force of the Traffic Inspector's argument, still he could not help pleading for him again, for though only a gate-keeper he had somehow endeared himself to the Station Master. It could not have been otherwise. Daily contact between the highest and the lowest cannot fail to engender affection and intimacy in both, if the highest has any humanity in him, and in this case Vinayak Rao, in relation to the gate-keeper, was by no means one of the gods. But he knew that argument would not save the gate-keeper. His only chance now lay in making a personal appeal to the Traffic Inspector, though he did not see much hope in that direction, either. Where he had failed the

poor gate-keeper was not likely to succeed. Still, he might. And anyway, he would have the satisfaction that he had done all he could for the old man. So he requested the Traffic Inspector at least to see the gate-keeper.

When the old man appeared he bowed very low and stood with folded hands. He wore the usual blue railway uniform, soiled with much wear, and a turban that was only loosely tied round his head. His hands, though thin and rough, had still some suppleness in them. But his face was dry and thin and wrinkled. He looked from the Station Master to the Traffic Inspector. For a moment there was complete silence. Then the Traffic Inspector asked him if his name was Badrinath. The gate-keeper said, "Yes sir."

"You are an old man now," said the Traffic Inspector. "You have spent many years in the railway service. Why don't you retire now and rest?"

"Yes *Sahib*, my hair has turned grey in *Sirkar's* service," said the old man, thinking he was about to be offered a reward in recognition of it.

The Traffic Inspector on his side imagined that the old man was agreeable, so he said,

"Very well, then, you may see the Station Master this evening for the settlement of your dues. You are discharged from tomorrow."

If the roof had fallen on him, the old man would not have shown greater astonishment. He could hardly believe his ears. Suddenly he remembered his last, and only, neglect of duty, and understood why he was being discharged.

"I implore you, *Sahib*," he said, "have pity on me. I have no one to look after me. I promise...."

The Traffic Inspector was visibly moved by the tears in the old man's eyes, and Vinayak Rao turned his face away.

"Have you no distant relation to whom you may go for food and shelter?" the Traffic Inspector asked.

"No sir, I have no one. The trees and plants that I tend in the hut-enclosure are my only children and support. Please do not drive me out! I have not long to live."

"Badrinath," the Traffic Inspector said kindly, "you do not understand. The railway company cannot possibly consider these things. I feel sorry for you, we all do. But it would be taking a serious risk to retain you.



However, you may go now. We shall think it over."

After the gate-keeper had gone, the two officials conferred together. Both realised that sentiment, however noble in itself, was out of place here. So, much against their will they decided to dispense with Badrinath.

That evening the old man waited anxiously for the arrival of Vinayak Rao. The suspense of many hours had been unbearable and made him feel older by many years. When at last the Station Master appeared the gate-keeper asked if there was any hope for him. Vinayak Rao only shook his head as he stood with his hands resting on the silver knob of his walking-stick. Badrinath's heart sank within him. With an effort he said, "Then I have to leave this place tomorrow?"

"Yes, I am afraid so." So saying, Vinayak Rao fell at the old man's feet.

"*Rao Sahib! Rao Sahib!*" cried out the old man, "what are you doing? Touching the feet of a poor man!" He had tried to move back.

Vinayak Rao rose and said, "*Kaka*, you are old enough to be my father. You are a good man, it doesn't matter if you are poor." Then taking hold of his wrist he added, "Now listen

*Kaka*, you will come and live with me from tomorrow, and look upon me as your son."

Placing his free hand on Vinayak Rao's shoulder the old man said, "You have a large heart *Rao Sahib*, and I am grateful to you for your kindness, but I shall live and die in this spot."

"But how?" asked Vinayak Rao in surprise.

"I don't know," replied the old man doggedly, "but I must. I could never leave it. And now will you do me one favour? Take these kittens with you and look after them."

"I'll take the kittens but you will have to come too," Vinayak Rao insisted. "You are not too well and do not know what you are saying. How can you continue to live here when the place will be occupied by the new gate-keeper? They will not let you. Can't you understand?"

"Oh, but how can I leave this place?" said the old man brokenly. "The place may not belong to me, but I belong here, I have my roots in this soil, I am like one of these trees that I have planted. It's my HOME! I have no other."

"Yes, you have, you have," Vinayak Rao said tenderly. "Have my daily visits here meant nothing to you? You have been my attachment."

for the plants and trees, have you none for me? To me, it is almost as if we were close relations. Have I not always called you 'uncle'? How then can you say you have no other home? My home is your home."

The old man looked up at Vinayak Rao with great surprise. He had always looked upon the Station Master's attention to himself as a condescension and a kindness, nothing more, certainly not anything like friendship. How could a poor gate-keeper think otherwise? He felt grateful and said, "May God bless you, *Rao Sahib*, for these sentiments, but I am an old man and can only be a burden to you."

"No, you won't," Vinayak Rao put in quickly, "I have no father, and you are going to be a comfort to me and my family. We want you for our sake."

"Very well, then," said the old man with a shrug, "as you say so let it be, though you are being too good. I shall go with you to-morrow, but consider it well again, during the night, *Rao Sahib*. Have you asked your wife? Is she agreeable?"

Vinayak Rao laughed at this and said he had made sure of everything, and as to considering it well again he had done so already.

The next morning Vinayak Rao called before sunrise. The little girl Shanta was

there before him, to milk the goat. She stood knocking at the door and was calling, "Grandpa! get up grandpa! it is time to milk the goat. And I have brought the ground wheat." But the door was not latched from inside. The two pushed it open and entered. The gate-keeper lay stretched on his *charpai*<sup>11</sup> in perfect peace. The child shook him by his shoulder, his forearm lay over the covering. She imagined that he was as usual pretending sleep, and would suddenly spring up and say playfully, "Wait till I catch you!"

Vinayak Rao had a sudden misgiving. He felt the old man's pulse, and laid the arm slowly back on the bed. He told Shanta her grandpa would not wake up again. He had died in his sleep. Shanta cried her little heart out.

Death had been merciful.

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11. Cot.

## Bhagat\*

Sarla puckered her pretty little nose and stretched her arms in a long yawn. It was early dawn, and opening her left eye she saw through the barred window a patch of deep violet and azure sky. Slowly the other eye opened itself, another yawn followed—and Sarla was wide awake. Five minutes later she was standing on the roof of the house gazing at the sky—now a patch of pink and blue fleecy clouds. Slowly the colours diffused and spread themselves; a tinge of gold crept in and soared higher and higher—until the whole eastern horizon was a glorious mass of shimmering gold and silver. She compared the golden sky with the golden voice of the *Bhagat* who had sung in the Temple the previous evening. How he had thrilled her! She hadn't been able to see his face (the woman in front of her had been pushing her too much, and how she had pulled Sarla's *saree*<sup>1</sup> over her face just because a booby was gaping at her!), only his round tanned neck, closely cropped

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\* Hindu religious singer. 1. The traditional one-piece dress of Indian women, gracefully draped round the body, the outer end of which covers the head.

wavy brown hair, and a long fair artistic hand that played softly on a *sitar*<sup>2</sup>. His deep melodious voice had risen slowly and steadily amid the general hum of the congregation. The simple country-men had stopped mumbling, the women their chatting and the children their crying—not a soul had stirred. There was magic in his voice, it had soared higher and higher—until Sarla's whole body had thrilled to it! She smiled, and inhaled the fresh country morning breeze. Would he sing again to-night? She must certainly see his face: a voice so sweet and a hand so fair and artistic must naturally possess an interesting face! Sarla threw her head back and laughed when the sunshine got into her eyes. She was standing on the top step of the rickety ladder, her right hand holding gracefully the skirts of her *saree* while her left hand patted and smoothed her shining curls. How the ignorant women at the Temple had laughed at her bobbed hair! A smile hovered and played round Sarla's lips as she recalled some of their remarks:—

“Oh! look! a *mundum*<sup>3</sup>!”

“*Bhabhi*<sup>4</sup>! *Bhabhi*! Look at that woman! She hasn't got a pigtail!”

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2. The most favourite stringed musical instrument of India, played with a steel plectrum. 3. Sindhi corruption of “Madam”.

4. Literally, a brother's wife; in Sind loosely meaning mother.

"Tiki, don't you know it's a man dressed like a woman?"

"But why.....?"

Hark! Hush! What was that? The soft hair on Sarla's arms stood up on end and an electric current rushed down her spine. The voice! That same deep, melodious, gloriously magical voice! It rose and fell, and rising again filled the whole atmosphere. Sarla let go of her *saree* and turned abruptly back only to stop dead again. Silence; no noise except the chirping and twittering of birds waking their mates from slumber. Was she dreaming? Was last night's song haunting her, making her believe what wasn't there? No. It couldn't be that. The echo was still there—it sounded in her ears, head, heart!

Five minutes later Sarla was running towards the river, looking left and right, peeping here and there, searching for the owner of *that* voice. Her brain was on fire, while her face, neck and arms were flushed with warm blood coursing in her veins. Where was he? She must see him! He must be somewhere by the river.... an 'ouch!' of pain escaped her as she tripped over a hole and fell. She sat down and nursed her bruised foot. Why! She was wearing only one slipper! In her saner moments Sarla would have laughed outright, but now she only

looked up with a frown on her beautiful forehead. Something floated on the air—a tinkle-tinkle of silver strings on a golden harp played by an angel's hand! The frown on Sarla's face vanished, she forgot her pain, forgot her slipper, and like a being under a spell walked forward.

The man by the river leaned his head against a tree and closed his eyes. He still carried some signs of his boyhood, a playful smile over his somewhat thin lips and a funny pucker between his eye-brows. His long lean body curled up gracefully, he held that *sitar* whose music mingled harmoniously with the music of the Universe: the sad sweet sighing of trees, the gentle murmur of leaves and the everlasting splish-splash of water. He sighed and in that sigh all his worries passed away in the dream of things. He was content: he was happy: he was away from the sorrows and heart-breaking disappointments of the world. A vision of a beautiful baby-like face of a woman came before his mind; a pang shot through his breast—the music came to an abrupt end—he opened his eyes.

Their eye met. Two black womanly soulful eyes and a pair of light brown eyes with yellow specks in them—clear, steadfast and honest. Sarla stood there hypnotised, a pretty picture



with dishevelled hair, soiled dress and bare foot. "Please don't stop," she whispered kneeling down, "you sing so.....!"

A flicker, and her eyelids dropped down and hid the shy modesty of girlhood that had suddenly sprung up. Was she mad? Why was she sitting before a man whom she had never talked to, whom she had never seen until now? She even did not know his name—all the women at the temple called him *Bhagat*. What would her aunt say? What would her father think of her? She must go away.....

"Who are you?"

Sarla looked up and instantly a rush of red filled her whole face. What beautiful eyes he had!

"I...." She was surprised at her little piping voice. "I am *Rai Bahadur*<sup>5</sup> Bulchand's daughter, Sarla. I have come here with my aunt to attend the annual fair. I think...." her voice grew husky.

"What do you want?"

The voice so sweet a few minutes ago was harsh; the lurking smile near his mouth vanished, the pucker between the eyebrows deepened and the yellow specks in the light-brown eyes

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5. A government title.

sparkled with anger. Sarla sat up astonished. Was she dreaming or was he mad? What had she done to cause so much anger in him? Then the sparkle of anger changed its hue; the pucker vanished, the lurking smile reappeared; the long slim fingers moved.....and *Bhagat* was singing—singing with his whole soul in his voice! And Sarla sat there swaying, eyes half shut, an ethereal smile on her dreamy face.

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“Sarla, hurry up!”

No answer.

“What is the matter with you to-day? You have been behaving very strangely since this morning.”

“Yes, *dadi*!” Sarla stood gazing at herself in the mirror.

“Oh, do hurry up! It’s past six o’clock and we won’t get any place in the Temple—leave alone a nice one. *Bhagat* is singing to-night, you know.....”

A flush slowly mounted on Sarla’s cheeks, temples, ears.

“.....And do please cover your head well....”

Slowly the flush disappeared leaving her pale and trembling.

"...The women there have been asking..... What's the matter, Sarla! Aren't you feeling well? Why! You are cold, child!"

"No *dadi*, I am all right." Sarla turned away, gently pushing her aunt's hand from her face. "I suppose it's the heat—but it's getting cooler now. Let's go.—I am ready."

The house where they were putting up was about a quarter of a mile away from the Temple. Throngs of men, women and children were hurrying forth, chatting, laughing and cutting jokes. The sun had not yet gone down and the western horizon was flushed deep with red, gold and crimson. Sarla looked up—a soft gleam appeared in her eyes, and the deep flush of the sky was reflected on her face as she recalled the rising of the sun that morning. *Bhagat* sang so wonderfully! Why had he renounced the world? What a pity he didn't enter the pictures or broadcasting—he would surely make a name! How he had laughed at her artless suggestion of going with him and becoming his *cheli*—but there had been sadness in the laughter, a deep sadness that flickered about the laughing mouth and smiling eyes. Yes, there surely was something behind the curtain. "Look, there's your Uncle. How late we are!.... Sarla, where are you going?"

Keep your slippers here<sup>s</sup>. I nearly lost mine yesterday and they are brand new.....”

Sarla stood there helplessly clutching her *saree*. Everybody was pushing her—a rustic youth passed by brushing her arm caressingly, but she did not even trouble to look at him. A volunteer—her cousin—came to her and offered to find a nice place for her. The court-yard of the Temple was roped in the middle separating the women's side from the men's. She wanted to sit near the now empty dais, to be near him, to see the expression in his mysterious light brown eyes with the gleaming yellow specks, to be absorbed in his voice as it soared higher and higher. She could die for him, she worshipped him, he was her hero, her God.....!

A pretty sunburnt face looked up, smiled at Sarla and beckoned to her. She was her new friend—a recently married country girl with black shining hair dressed behind the ears, a heavy nose-ring in her delicate nostril and plenty of gold jewellery on her neck, arms and ears. Sarla smiled back, and with a heart leaping with joy picked her way between shrivelled old hags and fat prosperous women, laughing children and crying babies. Twilight deepened, stars came out and lights were

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8 Indians attending religious functions put off their <sup>and wear</sup> and put on their head-dress—exactly contrary to West.

brought in. A hush fell. There was a throb in Sarla's youthful heart and a gleam of anticipation in her dark eyes. Slowly the dais became full with bald headed *sadhus*<sup>9</sup> in saffron-coloured clothes, long-bearded grave-faced *bawas*<sup>10</sup> and heavy turbaned young boys with gold rings in their ears. Sarla fidgeted. Where was *Bhagat*? Why was he so late? Wasn't he coming? She turned to speak to her neighbour but a woman behind nudged her and hissed in her ear not to speak. Two strong brawny hands flew over a pair of *tablas*<sup>11</sup>, a thin lean finger went swiftly up and down a string of *dilruba*<sup>12</sup>, mouths opened—and the singing started. Sarla fidgeted again. Where was he? Why didn't he come? Was he ill? Had she frightened him? From the depths of her throat a big lump rose and choked her. She had meant no harm; she loved him only as a young disciple loves his *Guru*<sup>13</sup>; worshipped him only as a devoted heart worships at a shrine. Somebody in front suddenly asked, "Where is *Bhagat*?" Another repeated the question, a third, a fourth, it went from mouth to mouth until the whole temple echoed and re-echoed with *Bhagat! Bhagat!! Bhagat!!!*

A gentleman got up and waving his arms

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9. Ascetics. 10. Sikh priests. 11. Two small drums which keep times in Indian music. 12. Popular stringed musical instrument palyed with a bow. 13. Spiritual guide.

silenced the crowd. He made a speech but Sarla only heard the first sentence : "*Bhagatji* has been suddenly called away....."

A rush of hot tears smarted her eyes and a shooting pain tore her poor heart asunder. *She* had frightened him ! *She* had made him run away ! *She* was the cause of his going away so suddenly ! Her head dropped down and rested on her knees, encircled by her arms. She had a headache, a painful throbbing of the temples. One moment her whole being was on fire and the next she felt she was freezing. *She* was the cause of his going away—*She* ! *She* !!

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It was a beautiful star-lit night. A cool spring breeze blew gently. Sarla lay tossing on her bed as if the sheets were made of red hot coals. It was long past midnight. Everybody was sleeping soundly, their snores mingling with the hooting of owls and the chirping of night insects. Flinging aside her coverlet she got up and came out in the yard. She always loved star-lit nights—bright little twinkling stars.

*"Twinkle twinkle little star,  
How I wonder what you are!"*

Sarla hummed the tune of childhood days and walked on. Her feet were bare the

grass was wet with dew. Ah ! It was delicious !

*"Up above the world so high,  
Like a diamond in the sky."*

There was another pretty phrase about stars. What was it ? She had written the phrase as soon as the teacher had uttered it—stars.....stars.....oh, yes : "Ye stars that are the poetry of heaven !" What a jewel of a phrase !....What was that ? Was it Jack o' Lantern ? Or a Will o' the Wisp ? Why—it was the silvery reflection of the stars on the river ! Was she dreaming ? How had she come near the river ?

Suddenly a pang shot through her breast ; this was the same spot where *Bhagat* had sung to her in the morning ! A tremor passed through her legs and she sat down. Her hand stole forward caressing the ground, and the tree where he had sat and where he had rested his head—the place was etched in her memory, she would never forget it. Something touched her fingers, it was a piece of paper hidden among the long blades of grass. With shaking hands she unfolded it, but the light was too dim and her eyes too hazy. With the feet of a deer, and leaping like a hare, she was in her room lighting the lamp.

"Little Sarla Devi<sup>14</sup>,

I had one of life's greatest disappointments a year ago. Then I met a saint. He was my *Guru*. I told him my sorrowful little tale and he said, 'keep away from women.' I am going away.—*Bhagat*."

Sarla sat there in the chair clasping the little piece of paper and staring at the window before her. The lamp had burnt low and the wick was almost invisible. Life was a mystery—perhaps more mysterious than the rising and setting of the sun, the gleam of moonlight on the water, the twinkling of stars.....A flush of colour appeared on the horizon, the sun was rising. Two big tears trembled in a pair of dark sad eyes and slowly trickled down. That same sun had risen the day before, but ah! how much had happened since! Sarla stood up, tall and dignified. The tears on her cheeks glistened and dried. Her heart was steady. Her head was cool. She felt exalted. For a minute she stood at the window gazing at the eastern sky—then whispered very softly and sweetly and perhaps sadly, "*Bhagat!*" A smile appeared on her face, she jerked her head back and taking a towel went into the bathroom.

(Miss) Gopi Mukhi

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<sup>14</sup> Literally, a goddess—respectfully applied to all Hindu women.



# The Burglar

I was sorry to read the obituary of *Dewan Bahadur*<sup>1</sup> J. H. Iyanger, C. I. E., retired Assistant Commissioner of Police, in this morning's paper. It was not long ago that his wife also died. *Dewan Bahadur* was a man who had won the respect both of the Government and the public. His only daughter Chandra is married to my friend Balram who is quite a wealthy man and has always seen to the comfort and happiness of his wife. Nevertheless, D. B. Iyanger's mind was often troubled. Actually the thing that vexed him was much too trivial, but he looked upon it as a discredit to his name and often spoke to his friends about it.

"To think that I have in my life brought to book thousands of criminals—murderers, house-breakers and other offenders, and yet when an ordinary burglar enters my own bungalow I am not able to trace him! "It is mortifying," he would say and puff hard. He could never forget it.

This is how it happened.

Balram blew into my house one Saturday

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1. A Government title.

morning and said that he and I had been invited to spend the week-end at Chandra's.

"Chandra's?" I said. "What Chandra?"

"You mug! haven't I been telling you about her for the last ten days? Girl we saw at the Exhibition some time back."

"Oh, that? You had simply mentioned a girl and said Rambha and Menaka weren't a patch on her. You never said it was Chandra or—"

"Well, they have both consented," Balram said, rubbing his hands in triumph.

"Consented to what?"

"Dunderhead! what should a girl consent to but marriage?" He almost shouted the word.

"Go on! Tell that to your grand-mother."

"But I'm telling *you*. Believe it or not." He walked away with a toss of the head.

"But you said both had consented. Who's the other one, and how can you marry both of them at once?"

Balram laughed; I saw no occasion.

"I'm marrying Chandra. I meant that mother and daughter were both agreeable. Only the father—" He suddenly stopped.

"Well, I'm listening," I said.

"You don't know what he's like."

"So there's the rub ? I shouldn't worry. though. These matters are usually decided by the women."

"Wait till you hear who he is. J. H. Iyanger. Assistant Commissioner of Police — *Dewan Bahadur* !"

"Nuts ! Commissioner of Police ! *Bahadur*<sup>2</sup> outside and dung-heap at home. All men are like that."

"You don't know that blighter. He has a voice like thunder. I heard his chauffeur had taken the horn out of his car as being unnecessary, like the appendix. Oh, all right. laugh ! Think I'm joking. don't you ?"

"My dear fellow, in that case all you have to do is to out-shout him and steal his thunder."

"D'you know how he got the title of *Dewan Bahadur* ? A chap went to him for a gun-license and out of ignorance placed a ten-rupee note on the table before him as license-fee. instead of making payment to the clerk. 'What's this ?' Iyanger boomed out. The fellow was scared out of his skin and

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2. Literally, a brave person.

confessed that it was a counterfeit note ! See ? Simply by roaring he pitched upon a gang of counterfeiters."

"But you aren't one of the gang, so why worry ?"

"I haven't told you all," Balram said. "I hear his home is run with as much authority and red-tapism as his office. Like G.O.'s<sup>3</sup>, he issues fiats for his family every four hours, and these are delivered to his wife, cook or *mali*<sup>4</sup>, as the case may be, by a special constable."

"Well, you have my blessings. May you learn to obey his orders like them. Shall I go and place a coconut before god *Ganesh*<sup>5</sup> ?"

"You will do nothing of the sort; you will just accompany me," he said.

"Accompany you ? Where ?"

"To his bungalow."

"Why ?"

"Because we've been invited. It's been arranged by the mother. The old man wants to know what I'm like. We have to play tennis with him this evening."

"I see. He wants to see how strong you are. Like a horse-dealer. But how do I come in?"

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3. Government orders. 4. Gardener. 5. The Hindu Elephant-god worshipped with coconuts and rice for offerings.

"Haven't I told you ? I'm not going alone.. I've arranged that I would bring along a friend. Look at this."

It was the letter of invitation. Nicely worded and all that.

"Come on, be a sport and see me through this," he said.

We got there at five on the dot and were heartily received.

"I am glad you young fellows are punctual," Iyanger said. "I have always maintained that small things are pointers to character. How can our people rule themselves when they have no sense of time ?"

Mrs. Iyanger was very cordial too. She seemed quite meek. Nevertheless when I saw the two together I could not help thinking of the lion and the lion-tamer I had seen in a circus. As for Chandra, she was tall and graceful like a coconut-palm and pretty as a picture.

At five-thirty sharp we started playing tennis on Iyanger's private court. Balram and I played opposite Iyanger and some fellow who was Inspector of Police. Iyanger had hoped to defeat us easily but he soon found he was not playing against kids. I must admit

he was a good player but he was handicapped by his age. I made the old boy run as much as I could by placing and lobbing the ball, and his face soon showed red as a raw tomato, though more from irritation than exertion. I found however that Balram was either not in form or not putting forth his best effort. The game ran fairly level most of the time. We were seven-all in the third set, after having won the first and lost the second. It was getting somewhat dark, so we agreed to play one more game and let it decide the match. We all played equally carefully except Balram. I urged and coaxed him. He said he was too tired. After thirty-all I scored a point off the Inspector by driving hard and deep to his left. The old boy glared as if he would eat me up. For the next point I poached at the net and sent a smashing cross-stroke to Iyanger's left.

"Game!" I shouted.

The old boy frowned and visibly gasped.

"That was out, you ass," Balram said.

"Was it out?" Iyanger asked. "I thought it kissed the line."

"Not at all, Sir. It was miles out. I saw it distinctly."

The old boy's face relaxed and we resumed

at deuce. The next two points were lost by Balram. I was furious.

"Very enjoyable game," said Iyanger in a throaty voice. "You must be thirsty. I'll go in and send you some sweet drinks."

We were soon shown into our rooms as we were to have a bath and change. Balram dashed in trying to avoid me but I tugged at his sleeve.

"Look here," I said, "trying to be clever, were you? What the hell did you mean by handing over our match to your prospective father-in-law?"

"Sh.....sh!"

Then there came a voice like a fog-horn.

"Not bad, not bad. He'll be all right if he practises with me for some time."

A mild female voice followed but it was too low to be understood. The first voice resumed.

"His friend played a brilliant game, but then the fellow can't be a good student. He must be wasting his time on tennis. Damn fool, I should say."

I put down my drink and was about to thank Balram for this nice reception, when a constable entered and presented a note.

"B.O. 436 A," I read.

"What does that mean?" I asked the constable.

"That is Bungalow Order, Sir."

"Hm! let's see what the order is. This looks like a programme."

7 p.m. to 8 p.m. .... Guests will have a bath.

8 p.m. to 8.55 p.m. .... The lady of the house and *Kumari*<sup>b</sup> Chandravati will entertain the guests in the guest room. *Dewan Bahadur* will look through the office files.

8.55 p.m. .... Dinner gong.

9. p.m. .... Dinner will be served.

Signed: J. H. I.

Anticipating comments Balram kicked me in the shins. There was nothing for it to do but to sit and wonder in silence. We had brought a change of clothes with us so we decided to follow B.O. 436 A. Everything in that establishment seemed to be regulated by the

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6. Term of respect applied to unmarried Hindu girls; *Shrimati* is applied to all women generally.



clock, for on the stroke of eight Chandra and her mother came into the room. After we had discussed the local cricket matches and the latest Indian films, Mrs. Iyanger said she had things to supervise, would we excuse her. I felt I ought to do a bunk too and leave the lovers together, but what excuse could I give? And could I contravene B. O. 436 A? Suppose I went out and suddenly met the old boy? Ah, I got it!

"Will you excuse me, you two? I must go and say my prayers. *Gayatrī* you know."

"But where will you do it?" the girl asked. "Surely, not on the tennis court!" she added with a giggle.

"Oh, I'll find a place in the garden, don't worry."

When I returned after some time Chandra informed us that her father always had dinner in the typically Madrasi fashion, in the *dhōti*<sup>7</sup> only, the upper part of the body quite bare. That was the "dress" prescribed for all gentlemen guests. The dinner would be served on the floor. So saying she left us to change again, as it was getting on for dinner time. When Balram took off his shirt I found he was without his sacred thread<sup>9</sup> and drew his atten-

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7. A Sanskrit formula of invocation to God. 8. Indian men's loin-cloth wrapped round the lower part of the body. 9. Constantly worn by orthodox Hindus as an emblem of high caste.

tion to it. He thought it must have come off with the tennis shirt in the bath room and went to look for it. It wasn't there. His tennis shirt wasn't there, Nor the trousers. I had luckily removed my things. Enquiries revealed that it was a standing B.O. for the servants to remove all tennis clothes from the bath room for immediate washing. Balram was in a fix. If the old man saw him without his sacred thread he would be shocked. He was an orthodox Hindu. He would think Balram was an atheist or a heathen and worse than an untouchable. In fact he might have him thrown out of the bungalow. Balram's fate now depended on an article that costs less than a pice, but where could it be had at that time? To have explained its absence to Iyanger by telling the truth would not have saved the situation, for even such negligence in regard to the sacred thread would scandalize a man like Iyanger. Besides, would he believe it? Balram began to curse the man who invented the sacred thread. How foolish to attach so much importance to a bit of thread?

"Don't be a fool," I said. "It is a matter of form like many other matters of form. Every religion has its forms."

"But why such a silly form? A piece of thread round the body! It *looks* absurd."

company. I'm made that way. Besides, I really couldn't bear to see Balram so hungry.

Groping our way through the dark we reached the dining room. Hunger had sharpened Balram's sense of smell and like a bloodhound he sniffed his way to the kitchen. On a board in the wall he found the delicacies that had been on his brain and he fell to gobbling them. He crunched the crisp *pakwans* with such gusto and so noisily that I was afraid it might wake up the old boy.

This is where the trouble began. If Balram had acted sensibly and not taken long it would not have started at all. I kept telling him that he should hurry up but he took no notice. I was feeling sleepy and decided to have forty winks, standing against the wall. I must have dozed off with a jerk of the head and tipped some receptacle holding utensils. Brass and copper and bell-metal, all came down with a deafening crash! I turned hot all over.

"Now you've done it," I said to Balram in a hard whisper, but he was as cool as a cucumber.

"What! aren't you coming?" I said.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," he answered as he swallowed a mouthful. "There's only two or three more to finish." I wasn't

going that far even with a friend. To face the old boy like a thief was not like being in hell with a friend, having a pleasant chat. It was putting friendship to too severe a test. I quickly beat a retreat but I had hardly crossed one empty room when I saw the *chowkidar* entering from the verandah. I ducked behind the open door and held myself in readiness to trip him as he entered. He went down with a bang, measuring his length against the floor. He must have hurt himself for he cried with pain and tried to raise the house. I took a few steps towards our room and returned as if to find out what had happened. By this time Balram would seem to have finished his repast. He had entered from the opposite end and switched on the light with a *sang froid* that seemed to me criminal.

"What's the matter, *chowkidar*?" I heard him say. "Burglar? which way did he go?"

He was out like a shot through the verandha, chasing the thief. When he returned after a few minutes he was out of breath, and by that time Mr. and Mrs. Iyanger and Chandra had all assembled in the kitchen. He reported that he had seen the burglar jump over the garden wall and disappear outside. A couple of constables were instantly set in pursuit. The

fact that Balram had dashed out after the burglar impressed the old boy very much. He thumped him loudly on the back in approbation.

Early next morning, as we were enjoying the joke in our beds a constable entered. He *salamed* and presented a piece of paper.

"B. O. 436 B," it read. Lower down the order said, "At 10 a.m. the betrothal ceremony of *Subhaggyavati*<sup>12</sup> Chandravati will take place. The following persons will attend :—

1. The lady of the house.
2. *Subhaggyavati* Chandravati.
3. *Prohit*<sup>13</sup> Shathkopacharaya.
4. Guests (list appended).

Signed : J. H. I."

Balram asked the constable who would be sent to fetch the *Prohit*.

"I have been asked to do that, Sir."

"Then, would you..." he whispered something into his ear and gave him some money. "And don't forget it," he added.

"No, Sir, I'll bring two instead of one."

He *salamed* and went out.

"What was that you ordered?" I asked. "And why this secrecy?"

"Oh...er, only a sacred thread, you know."

12. Fortunate—a form of blessing. 13. Priest.

## The Stone

It was evening, and the sun before setting had disappeared behind ink-black clouds. Darkness had descended all too soon. From the hills of Gagret a few iron chimneys had begun to send out whiffs of smoke, when Shankar reached the place, sick with fatigue.

He went straight to the *bazar*<sup>1</sup> to find something to eat. Having refreshed himself somewhat, he set about in search of shelter. The number of pilgrims was countless and there was not an inch of space in the two *dharamsalas*<sup>2</sup>. Several pilgrims, on that account, had pitched themselves and their luggage out in the open spaces, improvising fire-places with rough stone and brick. A sharp cold breeze had begun to blow in which the many lighted fires seemed to shiver and burn. The wind soughed through the dark pines in the valley below.

Shankar looked helplessly around. He shivered and looked at his clothes. Leaving the *bazar* he staggered down into the valley

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1. Market-place. 2. Charitable rest-houses run by philanthropists all over India.

where he easily found shelter for the night in a small school for the children of poor hillmen. Adjoining the school was a small dispensary. Both had been started by a schoolmaster who had dedicated his life and property to the service of the poor. The schoolmaster provided Shankar with a blanket and a *chures*<sup>3</sup> to sleep on.

Shankar lay down dog-tired but could not sleep, either from underfeeding or because of change of place. He got up, threw the blanket round his shoulders and sat up on the window-ledge. His past life came back to him.

He thought of his undergraduate days in the Punjab when he had begun to feel an aversion for woman and wealth. This may have been due to his poverty and the hardships he had to endure in order to acquire education, and the striking contrast in material well-being which his sensitive nature felt between himself and many of his fellow-students. His parents had died when he was still a child. His elder brother earned a salary of Rs. 20 - a month and could with difficulty maintain a wife and four children on that meagre amount. In the circumstances he could not possibly have paid for Shankar's education, nor did Shankar himself wish to throw an additional

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3. *chures* carpet.

burden on his brother. Therefore when he heard that education was cheap in the Punjab he managed to collect enough money to pay his fare, and left his home in Bihar and journeyed to the land of five rivers, to study for the Master's degree in Sanskrit.

He had a passion for learning and did not wish like his brother to sell himself for the paltry sum of fifteen or twenty rupees a month. But though the tuition fees in the college were not high he needed money for books, money for food, money for clothes. He had to struggle hard, living in *dharamsalas*, going without many a meal, and shivering through the winters for lack of warm clothes. By the time he secured the Bachelor's degree he got sick of life and wanted to renounce it, hardship being a good soil for nourishing the seeds of *vairagya*<sup>4</sup>.

The entire valley was wrapped in a thick cloak of darkness. A stray light twinkled now and again from the surrounding huts. He had wandered so long, he reflected; would the wandering, physical and spiritual, ever end? He did not feel as if he had taken a single step towards his destination.....

After passing the degree examination he



happened to read "Woman and Wealth" by Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa<sup>5</sup> and it changed his outlook. He had wanted to secure the Master's degree and become a professor in a college and so rise in the social scale. But now he realised that material comfort was not a thing to feel proud about or to be pursued as an end in itself.

Outside on the humid air floated a million fireflies, the points of light switching on and off and shifting about crazily. He saw their mad dance, their vanity at possessing so much light. In that moment they symbolized for him the vanity of all possession. For how insignificant, he thought, was their light when the stars appeared. And when the moon rose up where was the light of the stars? And how pale and ashamed the moon looked in the morning-light! Was not pride of place and wealth subject to the same humiliating limitation? Even if one had a million, one was not happy because another had two million. Wealth was never known to bring peace of mind or happiness.

And woman?—When he was at college the girl-students seldom looked at him because he was poor, ill-clad and ill-fed. He often felt

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5. The great Indian saint and philosopher of the 19th century.

piqued by their indifference and resolved to "show them" when he became a professor and married a well-educated and good-looking wife. It was provoking to see many a duffer carry off a prize-girl simply because he had money. He often saw beauty and the beast joined together for no other reason than that the beast had a "background", and felt personally insulted. But then he read that woman was the source of all human troubles. She deprived man of his freedom, increased his wants and made him an economic slave. He decided to remain free always and keep away from her.

Shankar pulled the blanket over his face and half lay down on the window ledge. From the *bazar* above came the sounds of carriage wheels. Many pilgrims who wanted to arrive at their destination early in the morning had undertaken night travel. Where was his destination, he asked himself? He had not got anywhere. He had neither acquired the highest university degree nor achieved freedom from worldly cares. He had found it difficult to conquer his mind. Instead of becoming a *vairagi* he had become a schoolmaster in a newly started school, but the school had closed down within a year because its chief donor had been ruined by speculation.

Shankar got back his freedom, but he could neither earn a living nor proceed with his education. And renunciation was not such an easy affair. It required study and stern discipline. He decided to return to Bihar, seek out a *Guru*<sup>o</sup> and spend the rest of his life in his service. But he had heard of the famous religious Fair of Chantapuran in the Shivalak hills and decided to visit it before returning.

The Fair takes place in October, but preparations for it are made a good deal in advance. Many religious societies and service groups begin to function with great zeal. Processions and singing parties are organised in neighbouring towns which proceed solemnly to Chantapuran, reaching their destination by stages.

Shankar had been to the Fair and was returning. He had walked all the way from Hoshiarpur and was returning on foot. His feet were blistered, his legs stiff, and his mind was restless.

He sat up again and looked out into the dark night. In the distance he saw a long line of lights—lights from the lanterns swinging below the bullock carts creeping over the road.

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<sup>o</sup> Literally, one who knows the way; hence, spiritual guide, without whom pious Indians deem salvation impossible.

Turning round the bends they appeared and disappeared alternately. The sound of wheels grating on the road seemed to come from another world.

"Not asleep yet?" queried the voice of his host as he saw Shankar's form in the window, against the dim light of the room. He was returning from a round of the school after seeing to the comfort of pilgrims who had found shelter in it. Shankar was startled, but there was deep sympathy in the speaker's tone and he said, "No, Sir, I don't sleep easily." The schoolmaster came in and sat on the *durree*-covered floor. Shankar climbed down and took his seat by his side.

The two fell to talking. The schoolmaster's manner bespoke such uprightness and sincerity, his voice had such tender compassion in it that Shankar had soon told him the story of his life, his struggle and failure.

"Do not be disheartened," the schoolmaster said. "What is life without hard experience? Your experience is your wealth, its severities will make you strong and hard. You will learn to defy all misfortune. Think how much that means!"

Shankar listened in silence.

"Experience is often bitter but it has its

advantages. It makes one steadfast alike in joy and sorrow and so brings release from the bonds of desire, which is so necessary for the soul's salvation."

The schoolmastr's words acted like balm on Shankar's bruised spirit.

"There is no rest and peace in any material object," he continued. "All is hollow and therefore unsatisfying. Enduring peace can only be found in self-realisation. This world is like a quagmire which tries to drag down the human soul. One has to make a tremendous effort to pull oneself out of it by the relinquishment of all desires."

Shankar felt a little uncertain. "The bonds of desire can only be cut by the sword of renunciation," he said. "If every human being tried to renounce the world—"

"I did not say 'renounce'. One can live in the world and yet be out of it like the lotus flower growing in and yet keeping out of water."

"But ...." Shankar could not find words for what he wanted to say.

"Perhaps you wish to say that self-conquest is difficult. It is. But it *can* be achieved, and once it is achieved, the soul becomes

hard as a stone which the storms of the world cannot wear away. The nails of human desire can no longer penetrate it."

Shankar could not sleep for a long time. The schoolmaster's words kept ringing in his ears. When at last he fell asleep, he dreamt that he had become like the schoolmaster. His renunciation had been achieved. He slept on the ground, ate whatever came his way, had no desires and was at peace. He saw himself going about with a small bag of medicines for the poor, and educating their children. Then he found himself in gaol for national work where he received several stripes without squirming, his mind perfectly serene. He had become "hard as a stone which the storms of the world cannot wear away". But finally, to his great surprise, he saw that he really was transformed into a stone which went hurtling down a precipice with terrific speed towards the tempestuous waves of the sea below.

He woke up before the stone could dash into the waves, his heart beating violently. He felt hot all over and there were beads of perspiration on his forehead. He was puzzled by this part of the dream. Turning into a real stone and dashing towards the waves! Was it a kind of warning? What meaning could it possibly have? It was too fantastic

to have any, another man might have decided. But Shankar could not dismiss it from his mind. He knew it had a meaning. Why did he wake up before plunging into the sea and not after? Clearly it was a portent, though of what, he could not tell for the present.

Outside, the sough of the wind blowing through the pine needles had sharpened into a moaning whistle.

## 3.

*Bhabhī*<sup>7</sup> was the schoolmaster's wife. She became *bhabhi* to Shankar and the schoolmaster *dada*<sup>8</sup>. He had decided to live with them, feeling that he had found his *guru*. The schoolmaster had no objection.

Shankar learnt many things about him from *Bhabhi*. He was from a well-to-do family and could have entered government service, but after putting in a year at the Medical College he decided to dedicate his life to the service of the country. His father remonstrated with him but Din Dayal was adamant. He went and joined Mahatma Gandhi's *Ashram*<sup>9</sup> to acquire discipline, after which he rendered public service in many capacities. Soon his father died, leaving him some money which he

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7. Brother's wife. S. Literally, elder brother, loosely, father.

9. A retreat for spiritual advancement.

put in the bank. He put his two children in a boarding-house and came and lived in Gagret where he opened a charitable school and dispensary for the poor.

"He wanted to leave me behind," *Bhabhi* said to Shankar one day, "but I insisted on accompanying him."

Shankar never saw her looking cheerful. She never laughed, and he learnt that her heart was weak. She was constantly complaining of headache and often fainted. Shankar seemed to detect a fire and a thirst in her eyes and felt compassion for her.

It was not often he looked into her eyes. The schoolmaster had told him that the best way to save oneself from woman was to look at her feet, never up into her face or at any other part of her body, and to regard every woman as one's mother. Shankar therefore tried to engender special reverence in himself for *Bhabhi* by looking upon her as mother of the whole world. Whenever her image passed before his mind he instinctively bowed at her feet. Constant practice of this kind gave him strength and he felt at peace. Still, there were moments when he was shaken out of placidity.

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*Bhaḥi* was baking *chapatīs*<sup>10</sup> in the kitchen where Shankar sat eating them.

"I have shared this dry and tasteless food with my husband so long now that it has upset my stomach. I can't digest it." It was generally at these moments that she spoke to Shankar about the schoolmaster or herself. She had known comfort in her parents' home. She was their only daughter. Her father was an Engineer. With tears in her eyes she told him how her uncle had defrauded her widowed mother, leaving mother and daughter penniless. That was the time she started having hysteric fits.

Shankar looked up and saw *Bhaḥi* drying her eyes with a corner of her *sari*, and he felt a tender wave of sympathy surge up in him.

On another occasion she told him she was not dull and unlively in her childhood. Quite the reverse, in fact. She was so gay and laughed so loudly that her mother would scold her and say, "Your parents-in-law will think your laughter unseemly. child. They will send you back." She did not know then that in her husband's home the fountain of her gaiety would dry up completely.

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<sup>10</sup> Thin round cakes made of ground wheat.

Shankar could not help looking up at her in sympathy. He found her looking at him, so that their eyes met, and he lowered his instantly.

*Bhabhi* had no enthusiasm for her husband's ideals. "Inviting hardships unnecessarily," she remarked. "What does he get out of them?" She told him how he had once involved himself in a scandal before coming to Gagret. An orphan girl living in their neighbourhood was being given in marriage to an old man by her uncle, because a young man would have demanded a dowry. To save herself from this outrage she escaped from her uncle's home and sought refuge with Din Dayal. Din Dayal came to her rescue, refused to hand over the girl, and gave her education so that she might be able to look after herself. The neighbours made up all sorts of tales and blackened his character.

"Which was quite absurd, however," *Bhabhi* declared. "For how can a man go astray when he treats his own wife like a sister after their second child?"

Their second child was eight years old.

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Shankar stole a glance at *Bhabhi* as she stood putting buttons on his shirt. A delicate

shade of modesty was spread over her pale, sad face. Her features were exquisitely chiselled. But her eyes seemed tired and drooping, her lips dry like leaves in the mid-day sun. Shankar was touched with pity and his heart ached.

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"*Brahmacharya*<sup>11</sup>," said the schoolmaster to Shankar the the next day, "is necessary even for the married man after some time. Otherwise salvation is not possible. In fact, a husband must spend two or three days a week in solitude and meditation."

He himself practiced this discipline. During these periods *Bhabhi* was left unattended in her ailment. Shankar, however, could not see her neglected in her suffering. Once when she felt giddy he massaged her head with oil. But while massaging her temples, his hands came into contact with her delicate cheeks and his whole being was on fire. He left her abruptly, loathing himself. He decided never again to massage her head.

On another occasion, when the schoolmaster was away on his usual rounds, *Bhabhi* felt faint. Shankar was very much distressed and perplexed. It was evening and quite dark. Shankar had entered *Bhabhi's* room to look

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11. Celibacy.

for matches in order to light the lamp. He heard her sobbing.

"*Bhabhi !....Bhabhi !!*" he called. "What is the matter?"

She did not answer and broke into louder and heart-breaking sobs. She lay in her bed. He approached and asked what was ailing her.

"My heart....oh, my heart is sinking," she cried.

Shankar's hands and feet turned cold. He turned to the lamp but could not light it. His hands were shaking. He wasted a few matches before he could hold one to the wick. He went back to where *Bhabhi* lay. She was tossing her head restlessly on the pillow, her hand clutching her heart. Never before had he seen her suffer from such a severe attack. He remembered her husband administering Spirit Ammonia to her on similar occasions and rushed to the schoolmaster's room for that medicine. He came back with the bottle and pouring out a spoonful offered it to her. She would not take it. It was too distasteful, she said.

"Oh, but you must, *Bhabhi*. How will you recover otherwise?" Still she refused it, and he threatened to force it down her throat. She closed her mouth, clenching her teeth. He

tried to force the spoon into her mouth. Because of her resistance and his shaking hands, the medicine flowed down the sides of her mouth and trickling down her neck damped her shirt above her breast. Shankar turned giddy, but steadying himself with an effort poured out another spoonful. *Bhabhi* tried to push him away, but Shankar forced her mouth open with another spoon and poured in the medicine. She coughed as it trickled down her throat, and cried again.

"You will be well as soon as it begins to act," he said trying to comfort her.

She complained of cramps in her finger-joints and put out her hands to be pressed. Shankar sat down on the edge of the bed and began to massage them. Small delicate hands, they felt so soft to the touch. He had never felt anything like it before. The sensation sent little stabs through his whole being. He felt dizzy with an excruciating pleasure. Blood had rushed into his head and he could feel the nerves in his temples swell out and throb audibly. His eyes ached and he tried to close and press the ache out of them. Fortunately the schoolmaster arrived and relieved Shankar, and *Bhabhi* gradually fell asleep.

Shankar did not sleep that night. He felt feverish and his mind was a raging whirlpool.

Physical cravings were gnawing at his heart. He thought of the schoolmaster. How, oh, how was it possible to renounce at one stroke the maddening pleasure of the sense, to overcome the hunger of mind and body!

The next day he put this question to the schoolmaster in a general way. The schoolmaster said, "Physical needs are exactly like other needs. The more they are indulged the less they are satisfied. Indulgence only feeds the flame of desire. Pour the water of non-attachment over it and you will be free and impervious like a stone. It will bring you peace. It is only a question of practice."

"Stone" and "peace"—the words engraved themselves on Shankar's mind. He resolved that he would achieve that state. He would turn away from the allurements of the body which was nothing but a bait for his destruction. But then—*Bhabhi*?

#### 4.

Shankar was in his room, sitting against the wall on the floor and reading by the light of a lantern that hung from a nail above him. The schoolmaster had gone to visit a patient. *Bhabhi* had finished her work, and entering quietly came and sat on a *chatai*<sup>12</sup> that lay on

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12. Wicker-work mattress.

the floor near him. Shankar continued to read. After a few minutes *Bhabhi* yawned from fatigue, lay down on her back and closed her eyes in sleep.

Shankar's heart thumped wildly in his breast. He looked at her through the corners of his eyes. The edge of her *sari* had slipped down her head. Her neck was half open and he had a glimpse of the line that divided her breasts and disappeared under her shirt. Their rounded softness registered itself on his brain and he reeled. His heart which he had strived to harden into stone was being sawed by desire. He was terrified.

*Bhabhi* started in her sleep, and Shankar sprang up and darted out of the room. He ran like a hunted animal. Bare-headed and bare-footed in that silent night when the moon shone but dimly, he fled, crossing many a hill and valley, his heart full of dread—the dread of human love.

Morning light revealed Shankar sitting on a boulder, miles and miles from the school-master's house. His legs were covered with dust, his feet blistered and bleeding, and one of his toe-nails had been torn off. His eyes were heavy with sleep but he kept them open. He looked in the direction of the plains and saw

the ridges dwindling away in the distance and appearing like serried land-waves from that height. The sides of many hills were striped with silver—the silver of sparkling streams. He passed his hand over his face, pressed his eyes with his fingers and stretched his legs. His feet ached.

As he stretched his arms he saw that one of his hands had scraped up a small herb. There was a little soil clinging to the boulder, perhaps a seed had been blown on to it by the wind and it had sprouted in the rain. But the stone had not given in to its roots and the herb had withered.



# The Horoscope of Satyen

## 1.

My first glimpse of Satyen Bose did not prepossess me in his favour. Imagine a tallish young man of nondescript appearance rather austere clothed, sporting on a close-cropped skull a rather prominent *chaitan*<sup>1</sup>, and trying to convince Jagadish Sen, of all people, that one could recover the geography of the ancient world from the *Vedas*<sup>2</sup>! Jagadish was the wag of the fifth year postgraduate English class, and his solemnity on that occasion made all the onlookers shake with suppressed mirth. Another of those earnest and foolish mofussilites I thought with the typical Calcutta man's contempt for the provincial.

But Satyen's academic record was brilliant. Even I, a medical student, knew enough to realize that he was no imbecile. Madhu Roy who had taken me to the English class on that day was something of an admirer of Satyen.

A few days later Madhu brought Satyen to our hostel. I took them to my room and we had a long talk. Madhu introduced me as a

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1. Ceremonial tuft of hair. 2. Hindu Scriptures.

socialist who hated all old ideas and traditions that passed under the name of 'Indian culture'. Satyen listened to me gravely, at first. Suddenly at a particularly vehement expression of mine his whole face lighted up with a smile! And such a smile!....Then and there I became his friend, although my uncompromising socialism and his exposition of Indian culture often clashed in the corridors of the university buildings and in the parks and streets of Calcutta.

Satyen came from a *Jamidar*<sup>3</sup> family of Barisal. His father, a rich landlord, was very scrupulous in the observance of the '*thirteen ceremonials in twelve months*<sup>4</sup>'. And he was intensely interested in astrology. The mother reminded one of Ravi Varma's<sup>5</sup> picture of Saraswati, the goddess of learning. There was always a purity and dignity about her. Satyen was the only child of this rare couple. At the time when I met him he was twenty and had just passed his degree examination with a first in English and joined the fifth year class in Calcutta.

I hated everything old and effete and merely traditional those days, and Satyen was all

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3. Landlord. 4. A literal translation of a Bengali expression meaning, "all the ceremonials in the calendar." 5. Famous Indian painter of 19th century.

traditional. He saw a wisdom behind everything Indian, and was hurt when one slighted it. To him the Indian ways of living and thinking were not merely perfect but holy, sacred, unquestionable.

Our friendship was bitter, fiery. We often clung to each other in desperation, like two well-matched wrestlers.... And yet there was love. I have never loved anyone more.

## 2.

Two years passed. Satyen secured his Master's degree in English with distinction. I was then in the final year of my M.B. course. I had not met Satyen for some time. But I was not prepared for the sight when Satyen walked into my room one morning bare-footed, wearing *kachha*<sup>o</sup>, carrying a small square of grass-mat in his left hand. I jumped up. What had happened? Who had died? Mother? No, his father. He silently spread the ceremonial mat on a chair and sat down. For a few minutes no one spoke. Satyen's eyes were bright with unshed tears. He was a devoted son.

When he spoke at last, I found his voice strangely altered. It was not merely grief, it was a sudden realisation of a possibility for

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<sup>o</sup>. Mourning, consisting of white, unbleached *dhoti* and *chaddar*.

which he was not prepared. His father was to him like one of the *Vedas*, 'without beginning and superhuman'.

He was so much alone. His mother was dazed with grief. He had come to Calcutta in order to ask me to accompany him to Barisal. He could not just face the situation without me. I readily agreed, although there were only a few months left to my final examination.

I liked the green little village of Satyen. There were hardly any roads. Rivers and *khals*<sup>7</sup> made up for the absence of roads. Cane bushes, coconut palms and areca-nut trees gave to the landscape a distinctive appearance. And the huge, still and tree-fringed tanks reflected in the centre the changing glory of the sky.

I found it quite easy to call Satyen's mother *Masima*<sup>8</sup>. I think she liked me from the first. More than that, I think she trusted me. Perhaps it was my seeming hardness, my uncompromising strength that attracted her. In any case she was happy that I was with Satyen.

The *Sradh*<sup>9</sup> ceremony was a tremendous affair. I believe Satyen spent something like fifty thousand rupees. Some Brahmins were

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7. Narrow channels of water used as means of communication by boats. 8. Literally, maternal aunt; here, auntie. 9. The final ceremony in Hindu obsequies of which the feeding of Brahmins forms a part.

given silver drinking vessels, and practically the entire *pargana*<sup>10</sup> was sumptuously feasted.

I disliked this ridiculous waste, and when all was over I said so. Satyen looked surprised. "A son must do this for the peace of his father's soul," he said. I did not want to argue, but I silently cursed the greedy and ignorant Brahmins who had demanded so much to ensure the peace of the soul of Satyen's father.

When the household returned to normal, I begged leave of *Masima* to return to Calcutta. She asked me to stay for a little while longer. "Satyen needs you," she said. "Why don't you get a nice rosy little *Baudi*<sup>11</sup> for him?" I asked facetiously. And at once her whole expression changed. She looked as if the flood of her recent grief had broken the dam of restraint and nothing could stop it. I was nonplussed. I pleaded, "Pardon me, *Masima*, I did not mean to hurt you." "No, no, Ramen, you haven't hurt me," she said. "It is just my fate." I was rather puzzled. She looked up and noticed my expression. She smiled and I at once realized from where Satyen had got his enchanting smile. "Satyen cannot marry," she said, "not at least before his thirty first year." There was

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10. In Bengal, part of a district. 11. Brother's wife; a favourite term for a friend's wife too.

such a finality about her tone that I could not ask her anything more.

The next day I left the village, and Satyen, who accompanied me to the steamer jetty, promised to visit me in Calcutta very soon.

### 3.

The affairs of his big estate kept Satyen away from Calcutta for quite a long time. The next time we met I was a house-surgeon in the Government Medical College. I found Satyen rather worried. It was his mother's failing health, he said. It was nearly two years that his father had died, and still the good lady was grieving over the loss. Satyen sometimes felt that it was perhaps something more than that. People were frequently coming with proposals of marriage for him, and they distressed her very much. She seemed to be very fastidious and would not entertain even what appeared to be a good proposal. Not that she did not want her son to marry. She never said that. It was all very puzzling.

"Do you want to marry?" I asked.

Satyen replied, "I really can't say. At times I think that a daughter-in-law would be good company for mother."

"Leave out the mother for a moment. Now tell me, do you want to marry for yourself?" I insisted. Satyen was dumb for a while. Then he said slowly and thoughtfully, "I really can't say. You see I have a feeling that mother does not really wish me to marry."

I was quite annoyed at this attitude of a man of my age. "Mother, mother, all the time it is the mother," I shouted; "who is going to marry? you or your mother?"

Satyen was taken aback at the bluntness of the query. I suddenly felt sorry for him. After all, in his world his mother seemed to mean more than anything did in my world. Perhaps I should not have been so impatient with him. To smooth things over I suggested, "Let us go out for a walk."

But the walk was not a success. Satyen was suffering, and my consciousness of it lay like a shadow between us. He was a confused and frustrated man, and in my positivist extremism I could not be a fit companion for him.

He took a long time to unburden his mind. His father who was interested in astrology had a horoscope made for him only a few years before his death. No one knew what was in it, but he thought it had something to do with his mother's unhappiness. He had indeed

asked her a number of times to tell him all about it, but she had only retired into her shell of pained reticence.

"What could it be?" he asked, more of himself than me.

I said, "Whatever it is, these horoscopes are all bosh and nonsense, their findings seldom or never come out true. After all, it is not a science. At best, it is only a kind of guess-work based on insufficient data."

"How could that be?" asked Satyen. You know very well that the Indian *Rishies*<sup>12</sup> spent so many centuries in perfecting the science of astrology. It is a science. It has always been studied in India as a science."

This made me explode into my habitual vituperatives against things Indian. Satyen listened to me somewhat absentmindedly and by and by he smiled.....

#### 4.

I did not see much of Satyen for another three years. He wrote regularly but a growing practice made me a bad correspondent. Every winter he visited Calcutta for a couple of weeks and came to my clinic nearly every

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12. Sages.



morning. We sipped strong tea and, in between the calls of my patients, talked on our favourite differences.

Then suddenly one afternoon I received an express wire from Barisal asking me to proceed to Satyen's village at once as his dying mother wanted to see me. I could not disobey the summons. I went with fear and sorrow in my heart. I simply could not think of a world without *Masima*.

Yes, she was indeed dying. I saw that at once. And medical science could do nothing for her. I told Satyen that too. He burst out crying. *Masima* quietly turned her head in his direction and said, "*Baba*<sup>13</sup> Satu, please don't cry. You are so learned and wise, you know whatever is written must happen. You have been a good son to me, and I bless you. God must make you happy....." Her voice trailed off. Satyen walked out of the room shaking with sobs.

After a while *Masima* looked up meaningly and I came closer and sat on the edge of her bed. She whispered, "I have given you this trouble Ramen, because I know you love Satu, and will do anything for him. In that cash-box you will find his horoscope. When I'm gone, take it and keep it with you, and never

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13. Child—a term of endearment.

let Satu know what is written in it. When he is thirty one you may burn the horoscope." After this she did not speak much.

That very night she died.

I do not wish to describe the grief of Satyen. Even a materialist like me has his limitations.

But I had Satyen's horoscope at last, that poisonous document that had ruined two lives already, and must not ruin a third. I swore this again and again pacing up and down in my room.

Satyen was very reluctant to let me go. I stayed until the *Sradh* was over and then took him with me to Calcutta.

The first thing I did was to have the horoscope interpreted by a *Pandit*<sup>14</sup>. It was indeed a horrible piece of paper. Our Satyen was destined to die on the third day of the month of *Ashad* in the Bengali year 1348. I rapidly calculated. In that case Satyen was to live for another three years only. Let's see how it happens! I must disprove it. I must open his eyes to the utter worthlessness at this hocus-pocus.

But I must proceed cautiously, for I was dealing with a very sensitive man.

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14. A scholar in Vedic scriptures and sciences.

## 5.

I did not allow Satyen to go back to his village for several months. He stayed with me and I watched with interest the growing friendship between him and my sister-in-law Rekha. Rekha was a B.A. student and frequently visited us. If not beautiful she was quite an attractive girl. And I knew that she liked Satyen.

I would often talk to Satyen of the necessity of his marriage. He could not very well live alone now. Satyen did not argue much. He would only say, "Let us wait for a while".

One day I was in a particularly unpleasant mood. I demanded to know why he was shirking the issue. Satyen was rather embarrassed. He at last gave out that while on his death-bed his father had asked his mother not to allow him (Satyen) to marry until he was thirty one.....

"So you knew it all the time?" I roared.

"But I was not expected to know," he pleaded. "It was Dhamuda who told me all about it only the other day. He was with father at the time he spoke to mother."

Dhamuda, I knew, was an old servant of the family who must have told Satyen this terrible secret in order that his mother's reluc-

tance to let him marry might be less puzzling to the son.

But I was not in a mood to listen to such talk. I believe I quite lost my temper. I hardly knew what I was saying. I think at one stage I even said, "What right have you to trifle with Rekha's affections?" In any case Satyen left for Barisal that very evening with a pained expression on his face.

Three days later I had a long letter from him. - Not a word of reproach. He said he never thought of Rekha as other than a sister. He was indeed very sorry if his conduct had been liable to misinterpretation, and so on.

I did not know what to do. But just then I did not have much time to think of Satyen and his affairs. I was soon to sail for America as I had secured a scholarship for the Rockefeller Institute for medical research.

Satyen came to Calcutta to see me off. I tried to say that I had been foolish to misunderstand him about Rekha. But he smiled his wonderful smile and would not allow me to finish.

I went to America and Satyen's horoscope went with me.

During my stay abroad Satyen used to write long letters. I was glad to find that he was much quieter. He was studying Sanskrit and carrying on research in some obscure theory of *Patanjali*<sup>15</sup>. I wrote back saying that he would do better to read Karl Marx and Engels. But I could imagine him smiling over the suggestion.

I stayed away for nearly three years. And I returned home to find Satyen a very different man. He had come to receive me with the members of my family at the Howrah station.

For one thing he had allowed his hair to grow to a civilised length and the *chaitan* was no longer aggressively prominent. And he was actually wearing silk!

Indeed for some time it was quite difficult to imagine that this well dressed handsome young man was really my friend Satyen Bose. Right on the platform he confided that he had already read Karl Marx and Engels and was now reading Lenin. I was very glad. And I was more glad when I found a smiling and blushing Rekha greet us. The smile was for me but the blush, I was sure, was for Satyen.

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15. Famous philosopher of ancient India.

I cannot clearly analyse my state of mind then. I believe there was a fierce sense of triumph. At last my ideas had broken through the defences of Satyen, at last he was as he should have been long ago, my kind of man !

Satyen was staying with us and Rekha was a daily visitor. My mother gave me a broad hint that things were proceeding very satisfactorily and Satyen might any day ask for the hand of Rekha.

Now only one thing remained to make my triumph complete. I must make Satyen disown the horoscope, the last link between him and his morbid past.

## 7.

A week after my return I took the horoscope out with me and had it read again by a *Pandit*. Imagine my surprise when I was told that Satyen's term of life would expire, if the horoscope could be believed, within twenty-four hours ! There was not much time to lose.....

I hurried home. In the drawing-room I found Satyen and Rekha sitting side by side holding hands. They parted quickly but not quickly enough. I smiled and Rekha, her face a crimson oval, vanished. Satyen too was quite embarrassed.

I said, "You need not be abashed, my friend. I have been longing for this sight for a long time."

Satyen looked down and then looked up with a quick smile. "I'm really very happy, you know," he murmured. "You should have been long ago," I said. "Now when is the happy event going to take place?"

Satyen at once became grave. He said thoughtfully, "I believe I'm thirty one now. As far as I can calculate I completed my thirtieth year several weeks ago. But I'm not sure. The trouble is I can't find the horoscope. It used to be in my mother's cash-box. I have brought it down but it is not there."

I said, my mind full of a wicked triumph, "Why bother about that ridiculous piece of paper? I know all about it. You were supposed to die before your thirty first year. That's why your parents did not want you to marry. But now you are thirty-one, and as a medical man let me tell you, you are not going to die within another thirty years."

Satyen was very thoughtful. "Then the horoscope was entirely wrong? This has been on my mind for some time. You know it was this that made me change about

Rekha and all this." Here he indicated his fine silk *panjabi*<sup>16</sup> and *dhoti*.

It seemed to me that behind all his happiness Satyen was still unhappy. Something was lost, an old faith, an old security. He was like a stranger in a new kingdom of delight where his nostalgia sounded as a base note in all the music he heard.

Perhaps it was the devil who made me say what I said next: "No, you are not yet thirty-one. But I tell you that you will be thirty-one within twenty four hours. And we'll see how anything happens to you within this period! I take it upon myself to prove the absolute worthlessness of these old-world fooleries." I said much more, for I was excited. I did not even pause to notice what impression my words were producing on him. It was my moment of triumph and I was determined to make the most of it.

At last he quietly asked, "May I have the horoscope?" "Yes", I shouted, "you shall have your dirty horoscope. If I were you I should throw it in the Ganges."

Satyen quietly took the horoscope and unrolled it on the table. I went in to change, telling him that I would be back soon.

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16. A kind of loose garment worn by men in Bengal.



I believe I did not take more than fifteen minutes. But Sayen was not in the drawing-room when I returned. He was not to be found anywhere. The *dawar*<sup>2</sup> at the gate reported that Sayen Babu had gone out a few minutes before. I sent for a taxi at once and went in the direction taken by him. I looked for him everywhere. But he was nowhere to be found.

I was really troubled. Returning home I told mother everything. She at once asked me to inform the police, for, she told me, I had behaved in a very foolish way. There was no time to defend myself. I rang up the Police Commissioner himself, for I had some slight acquaintance with him. He assured me that everything possible would be done.

Throughout the afternoon and evening we waited anxiously. Rekha was the picture of misery. I knew she was holding back her tears with great difficulty. I rang up the police again and again and even asked them to offer a heavy reward for any person who would give us a clue to Sayen's whereabouts. But the police had no information.....

Late in the evening I went out myself. I

systematically combed all the favourite haunts of Satyen. But there was no trace of him anywhere.

About midnight I returned home. No, there was no news yet. At last, at about 4 a. m. the police rang up to say that a corpse answering the description of Satyen had been picked up from the Ganges at the ebb-tide! I rushed to the police station to find that lying on a table, with the horoscope clutched in his left hand, was our Satyen! And this time he was not smiling!

What made the fool do it?—I asked again and again in a dazed way.....Soon all my grief and remorse, all my heart-broken anguish, gave way before this strident note, "It is *his* triumph at last, it is *his* triumph....."

N. N. Chatterji